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# University of Texas Bulletin

No. 2060: October 25, 1920

## ROSSETTI THE POET AN APPRECIATION

BY

ALBERT EDMUND TROMBLY

Adjunct Professor of Romance Languages

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ALBERT EDMUND TROMBLY  
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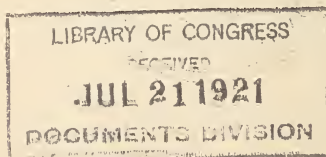
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The benefits of education and of useful knowledge, generally diffused through a community, are essential to the preservation of a free government.

Sam Houston

Cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy. . . . It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge and the only security that freemen desire.

Mirabeau B. Lamar



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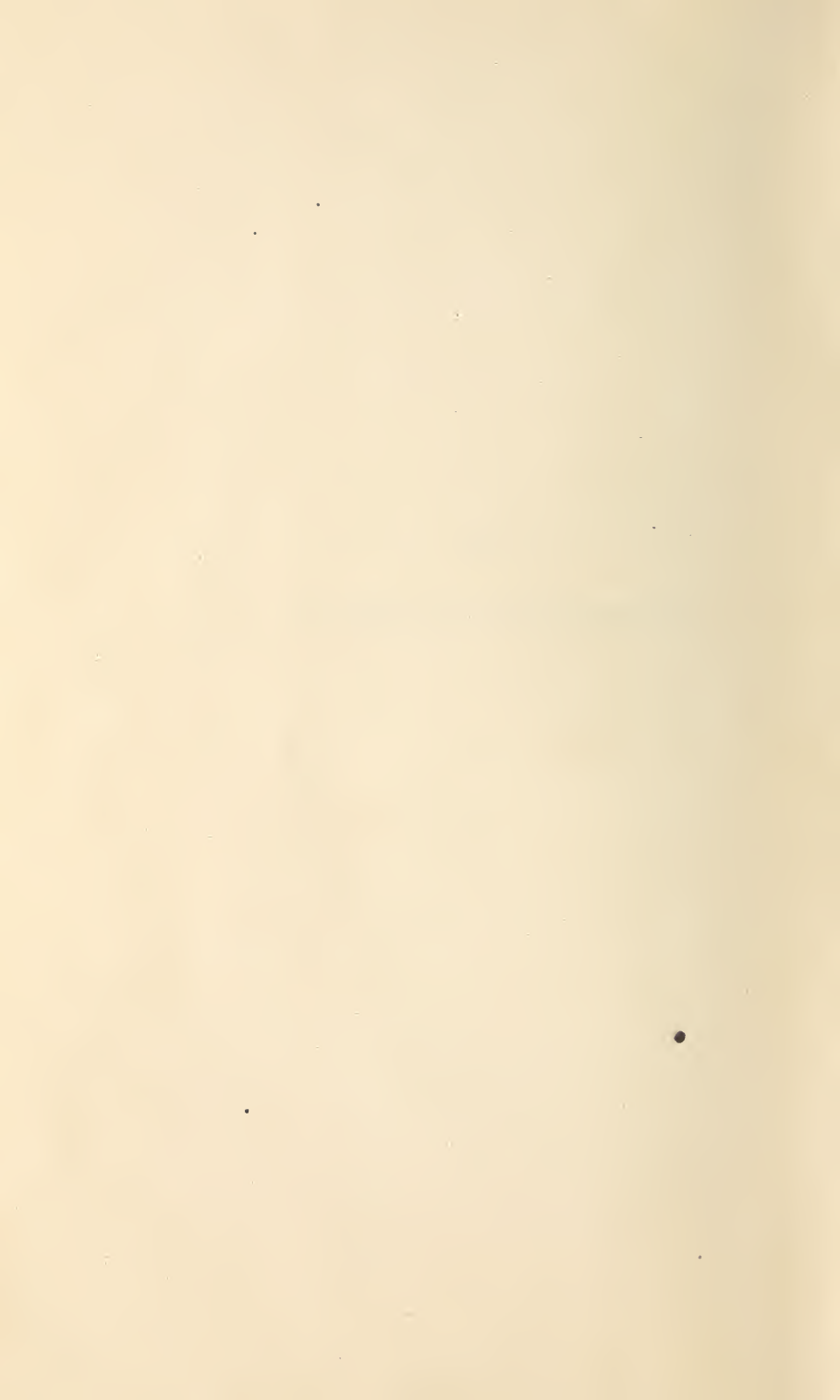
ROSSETTI THE POET  
AN APPRECIATION

By  
ALBERT EDMUND TROMBLY



*To*

*Antoinette De Coursey Patterson*



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Chapters I, II, III, IV and VI have already appeared in  
The South Atlantic Quarterly.



## AN ECHO FROM THE HOUSE OF LIFE\*

There is a spring within an English wood,  
The sweetest and the clearest in the land.  
Around it myrtle and the laurel stand  
And shade it with their leafy plenitude.  
Italian skies above that fountain brood;  
And Dante's foot is printed in the sand  
Beneath the crystal depth; and love's own hand  
Has fashioned it and lent it tone and mood.

And yesterday 'twas there I stooped and drank,  
I, toiler in the house of life, to sate  
A thirsting heart I could not understand.  
And as I rose and turned me from the bank,  
I ran to her and knocked upon her gate,  
And cried: "My Love," and took her by the hand.

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\*Reprinted from The Madrigal.

## INTRODUCTION

In the writing of this essay, I have been guided by the conviction that criticism should grow out of enthusiasm. It should be not merely analytical, but also constructive and sympathetic. Whatever else may be said for or against this book, it will be clear, I think, that it is the outgrowth of an enthusiasm. My main purpose is to enjoy Rossetti with my reader; other considerations are secondary.

I shall endeavor to present a fresh appreciation of my subject,—an appreciation which is not particularly mindful of what has been thought, said, and mooted about Rossetti in the past. So I have no other bibliography to offer than this—Rossetti's poems; but these I have read, re-read, and lived; and what I present in this volume, and I do it very humbly, is my reaction to those poems, and, in a sense, my re-creation of them. It is this sort of thing which I mean and understand by literary criticism.

My method has been to examine these poems much as one might examine a book of which he did not know the author, nor when it was written, nor how, nor why; that is I have tried to see them solely as poetry, as art,—as the expression of a man's reaction to the beauty which he has experienced,—without concerning myself too much with the voice that uttered them. My business is with Rossetti's poems, and with him only in so far as he exists in them; but no one can read these poems without realizing that they are a very large part of the man. His personality has passed into them, has fashioned them out of itself; and that is why they are so vital, so unmistakably his. And yet, once more, if I have found Rossetti it is because he is to be found in his work. Without denying that both pleasure and profit may be got in the study of the relation of the biographical data and the product of an artist, such a poem as *The Blessed Damosel* neither gains nor loses as art in my estimation when I learn that it was done before the poet was twenty years old. I am satisfied that a poem be a poem regardless of the conditions under which it was produced.

This presentation will be the truth in so far as I have been able to perceive it. That it may not be another man's truth goes without saying; but it is mine. We must not forget that the impression made upon us by others depends as much upon our ability to see as it does upon theirs to appear.

To speak of this or that poet as the greatest in an absolute sense is simply folly. A thing is great only in proportion as it is great to you or to me; nor need what is great to you be great to me. Values must always be relative despite all that the dogmatists may say to the contrary. If Rossetti seems to you to be a great poet, it is because he gives you in his poetry what you think great poetry should give.

In the following pages, I have had occasion, naturally enough, to use the terms *lyric* and *lyrical*. A word by way of explanation may not be amiss. In using the two terms I have had in mind that lyric poetry differs from poetry which is lyrical in this respect, that in the former the poet's intoxication arises out of what he has to say, while in the latter it is inherent in his manner of expression. Therefore, it will perhaps be clear that without being essentially lyrical, much of Rossetti's poetry is indeed lyric.



## CHAPTER I

### FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK

"I shut myself in with my soul,  
And the shapes come eddying forth."  
(Fragment)

"Conception....Fundamental Brainwork, that is what makes the difference in art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that it is gold and worth working." So wrote Rossetti; and by brainwork he meant that content of lyrical thought or mood which is susceptible of being shaped into poetry.

The laws of physics and architecture cannot in themselves make a building—there must also be the granite; and brainwork must be the structural stuff—the granite—out of which poetry is to be wrought.

We are forever talking of *great art*, *great music*, *great poetry*, not knowing quite what we mean by great, nor ever quite agreeing as to what is great. That we should not agree is both natural and fortunate, for what appeals to you may leave me unmoved; yet I suspect that what we most often mean, when we say that this or that work of art is *great*, is that we find it well laden with fundamental brainwork. It is this quality which will wear best and longest; and therefore as our taste and understanding develop we gradually leave behind us those artists whose beauties were trivial and external, and take ultimate refuge there where Beauty is large and deep. In the end it is spiritual elbow-room which we need and seek, and the poet who can give it to us is sure of a niche in our hearts.

A charge commonly brought against Rossetti is that he is difficult reading; but the only ground that I can possibly find for the difficulty is this: he has solidity and core. We are like children, who, if they could, would disregard the substantial part of their fare and eat only sweetmeats: we dislike and avoid whatever is solid in our mental food.

Now the only accusation, if accusation is the name for it, which can really be brought against Rossetti is that he is *concentrated*; but instead of condemning, we should praise him for it, and should be genuinely thankful that at least one poet has striven to give us pure gold; thankful that within one small volume can be contained all that he did.

To say that Rossetti's public is restricted because of his narrow range would be specious. In his own chosen plot—that relation of man and woman which we call love—his position is unique; and that in itself should be an earnest for a large hearing. The simple truth is, since the truth must be told, that he is too full of thought to appeal to the many. "One benefit I do derive as a result of my method of composition; my work becomes condensed. Probably the man does not live who could write what I have written more briefly than I have done." And it is precisely because his work is so condensed that Rossetti's readers are not numerous; but, since he cared little for the suffrage of the public, why should we who love him care any more? The true artist cannot be concerned with prostituting his talents to an indiscriminating public; if he wins a hearing that is purely incidental: his sole duty is with himself, with Beauty, and with his best possible interpretation of her.

I have spoken of *brainwork* as being a poem's content of lyrical thought or mood. Now let us see how Rossetti exemplifies this definition. Let us take first this sonnet in which the content is lyrical thought. Excellent as the poem is in itself, and indubitably stamped as Rossetti's by the imaginative quality of the sestet, it is not as peculiarly his as are the poems expressive of a mood.

"Think thou and act; tomorrow thou shalt die.  
Outstretched in the sun's warmth upon the shore,  
Thou say'st: 'Man's measured path is all gone o'er;  
Up all his years, steeply, with strain and sigh,  
Man clomb until he touched the truth; and I  
Even I, am he whom it was destined for.'  
How should this be? Art thou then so much more  
Than they who sowed, that thou shouldst reap thereby?  
Nay, come up hither. From this wave-washed mound  
Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me;  
Then reach on with thy thought till it be drowned.  
Miles and miles distant though the last line be,  
And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond,—  
Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea."

Now turn to a poem in which the content is lyrical mood. Spinoza speaks of emotions as being thoughts too obscure and ill-defined to become articulate; and it is in his ability to make intelligible to us emotions and moods so fine and so elusive that they escape most of us completely, that Rossetti is unmatched. Others can grapple with concepts and ideas, but no poet of whom I am aware can make an abstract mood concrete as he can. See how, in this magnificent sonnet, he renders articulate emotions roused by music heard, emotions which in most mortals can evoke nothing but silence not that we would not speak, but that we could not if we would.

"Is it the moved air or the moving sound  
That is Life's self and draws my life from me,  
And by instinct ineffable decree  
Holds my breath quailing on the bitter bound?  
Nay, is it Life or Death, thus thunder-crown'd,  
That mid the tide of all emergency  
Now notes my separate wave, and to what sea  
Its difficult eddies labor in the ground?  
Oh! what is this that knows the road I came,  
The flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame,  
The lifted shifted steeps and all the way?—  
That draws round me at last this wind-warm space,  
And in regenerate rapture turns my face  
Upon the devious coverts of dismay?"

Imagination, atmosphere, and magic, are all closely allied in Rossetti, and whether occurring separately or in combination they make up a large proportion of the content of his poems. Imagination was one of his greatest gifts, and he trod in its ways with as sure a step as that with which most mortals walk their city streets. From the fact that he lived so entirely for and within his art, and from constant association with early Italian poetry and painting and with Old French literature, it was only natural that he should have been enamored of things mediaeval. It is in this effort to construct for himself an environment out of the past that he may be called an anachronism; and that he succeeded in no small measure was thanks to his imagination. Hall Caine tells us that, on the occasion of his first visit to Rossetti, after having spent the night amid censers, sacramental cups, and a host of other mediaeval objects, it was with a sense of relief that he greeted the out-of-doors again. As he puts it "outside the air breathed freely."

There is often an element of surprise in Rossetti's imaginative flights; and however wide the sweep of his wings the flight is shorn of whatever might seem fantastic or grotesque by the flashes of verisimilitude which give a sense of reality to what is purely imaginative.

Taking *The Blessed Damosel* as the point of departure in Rossetti's career as a poet, we find him equipped with a splendid technique, and with an imagination which he himself never surpassed. Certain passages from this poem have been so often used to illustrate his imaginative powers, that it would be trite to cite them here were it not that I hope to show how well the poet succeeded in lending a sense of reality to them.

If we take out of their context, as is so often done, the verses which tell that from the bar on which she leaned the damosel was

"So high, that looking downward thence  
She scarce could see the sun"

there is a feeling of hanging in the air; if we give those verses their place in the stanza which contains them, we realize a sense of satisfaction that

"It was the rampart of God's house  
That she was standing on"

and the "rampart of God's house" affords a base from which the imagination may move with surer foot and wing. And what the "rampart" does for this stanza, the "bridge" does for the next. It is from the "bridge" as a starting point that

"this earth  
Spins like a fretful midge."

It is with such bits of verisimilitude that, throughout his work, Rossetti gives to his imaginative flights a sense of reality and truth which makes them the more startling and the more overwhelming.

There are times too when his imagination takes a turn which is more subtle, more elusive, and often very poignant. In *The Blessed Damosel* the poet is telling that to the maiden it seems as if she had been in heaven but a single day, while in reality she has been there for ten years; and

"(To one, it is ten years of years,  
....Yet now, and in this place,  
Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair  
Fell all about my face....  
*Nothing: the autumn fall of leaves.*  
The whole year sets apace.)"

Here the starting point of the flight is "the autumn fall of leaves"; but this time the effect is more vague, and, perhaps for that very reason, more poignant, and gives the feeling of half-remembered music or of the sound of a bell caught in the wind's lull so indistinctly as to make one wonder whether it is real or imagined. There is the feeling too of being brought face to face with an occult revelation. At sight and sound of falling leaves, the poet suddenly be-

holds a casement flung open in the blue dome of God's house and the magnificent dream flashes upon his inner eye.

Something of the same feeling is conveyed by the last verse of this stanza of *The Staff and Scrip*, in which the queen is described as placing above her bed the staff and scrip of the knight whom she had loved and who had given his life for her.

"That night they hung above her bed,  
Till morning wet with tears.  
Year after year above her head  
Her bed his token wears,  
*Five years, ten years.*"

What long years are these—years of yearning and of patient hope, intolerable years, did they not hold out the promise of ultimate solace and peace. Yet only the supreme artist, the artist who takes into account his readers' as well as his own imagination could have achieved the effect which we get here. A lesser poet would have given us a detailed description of those years, but Rossetti knew that he could best make us know of them by leaving them to us. Such passages are numerous indeed, but I must content myself with the two following; from *The Love-Letter*,

"And her breast's secrets peered into her breast"

and from *The Birth Bond*,

"O born with me somewhere that men forget."

The suggestiveness of such a verse as this last cannot be compassed quite, but resembles that of the alluring vistas which we catch in certain of Rossetti's paintings, vistas of distant fairylands seen through an open window or door.

There is a convincing quality in Rossetti's imagination, due, sometimes to the skillful intermixture of verisimilitude, as has already been pointed out, and often to the underlying matter of sense experience. The purely fanciful does not enter in; what the poet sees, he sees not only as the thing in itself, but also as that of which it is capable.

Herein lies the power of the creative artist. Looking off to sea on a day of "heat fogs" the poet notices that the sky-line is lost and that sea and sky seem to rise as a single wall. Out of that visual experience he spins this imaginative web, strikingly imaginative, yet wholly tangent with the initial experience and shaping its wings of the very stuff of other common human experience, the sight of flies dropping from a wall as they die.

"But the sea stands spread  
As one wall with the flat skies,  
Where the lean black craft like flies  
Seem well-nigh stagnated,  
Soon to drop off dead."

This takes us naturally enough to a consideration of the imaginative element in Rossetti's figures of speech, that element which because of its profusion is sometimes distracting, but into which is condensed so much of what the poet had to say. Original, surely, is this from *The Portrait*, though not distracting; and in its calm and melancholy beauty, unsurpassed.

"Here with her face doth memory sit  
Meanwhile, and wait the day's decline,  
Till other eyes shall look from it,  
Eyes of the spirit's Palestine,  
Even than the old gaze tenderer:  
While hopes and aims long lost with her  
Stand round her image side by side,  
*Like tombs of pilgrims that have died*  
*About the Holy Sepulchre."*

From *Rose Mary* is a beautiful but much less striking bit.

"Slowly fades the sun from the wall  
Till day lies dead on the sun dial."

The same poem contains this:

"The hours and minutes seemed to whirl  
In a clanging swarm that deafened her."

Reminiscent, perhaps, of the appearance of the angel in the opening of canto II of the *Purgatorio* is this couplet from *The White Ship*.

"At last the morning rose on the sea  
Like an angel's wing that beat tow'rds me."

In *The Dark Glass*, love is characterized as being

"the last relay  
And ultimate outpost of eternity"

while the lover, as compared with love, is

"One murmuring shell he gathers from the sand  
One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand."

And here, in *The One Hope*, we have one of those flights, so novel and yet so satisfying, which Rossetti alone could have achieved.

"Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet?"

There are two factors of Rossetti's writings of which one must speak here, for they are so largely the product of his imagination: I mean his magic and his atmosphere. He was exceedingly fond of the ghostly and supernatural; and for magic he admired Keats, and thought Coleridge one of the greatest of English poets. In the beautiful prose\* tale which he has left us—*Hand and Soul*—he describes a young artist as painting his soul which had appeared to him in the semblance of a woman; and in the fragmentary tale, called *St. Agnes of Intercession*, a young English painter is described as finding in an Italian gallery his own likeness and that of his sweetheart in portraits painted by an early Italian of himself and of the woman he loved. Such compositions are sufficiently replete with wonder; yet the high-water mark of Rossetti's magic is reached in *Sister Helen*. The theme of the poem is weird in itself and the splendid

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\*Such writing as *Hand and Soul* will be denied the name "poetry" only by those who demand that poetry be in verse.

handling only heightens the effect. Helen has been deceived by her lover, and on the very day on which he is to marry her rival, she avenges herself by destroying him body and soul. To accomplish this, she resorts to a piece of witchcraft, known and practiced in her day, which consisted of burning in effigy the person to be destroyed. The fiendish ruthlessness with which Helen carries out her purpose, though the damnation of her lover involve her own, shows how the sorcery has operated even upon her. She has become as one possessed and is more witch than woman. See with what satanic satisfaction she gloats over the agony of her rival, when the latter comes to implore mercy for her lover.

“ ‘A lady’s here, by a dark steed brought,  
                     Sister Helen,  
 So darkly clad, I saw her not.’  
 ‘See her now or never see her ought,  
                     Little brother!’  
                     (O Mother, Mary Mother,  
 What more to see, between Hell and Heaven!)  
  
 ‘Her hood falls back, and the moon shines fair  
                     Sister Helen,  
 On the Lady of Ewern’s golden hair.’  
 ‘Blest hour of my power and her despair,  
                     Little brother!’  
                     (O Mother, Mary Mother,  
 Hour blest and bann’d, between Hell and Heaven!)

.....  
 ‘She may not speak, she sinks in a swoon,  
                     Sister Helen,—  
 She lifts her lips and gasps on the moon.’  
 ‘Oh! might I but hear her soul’s blithe tune,  
                     Little brother!’  
                     (O Mother, Mary Mother,  
 Her woe’s dumb cry, between Hell and Heaven!)  
  
 ‘They’ve caught her to Westholm’s saddle-bow,  
                     Sister Helen,  
 And her moonlit hair gleams white in its flow.’  
 ‘Let it turn whiter than winter snow,  
                     Little brother!’  
                     (O Mother, Mary Mother,  
 Woe-withered gold, between Hell and Heaven!)”

And when the wax image is entirely consumed and the lover's lost soul is borne by on the wind, the force of the witchcraft is spent and Helen emerges from witch to woman again only to realize that all is lost, even her own soul.

"'Ah! what white thing at the door has cross'd,

Sister Helen,

Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?"

'A soul that's lost as mine is lost,

Little brother.'

(O Mother, Mary Mother,

Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)"

In *Rose Mary* and *Eden Bower* the effect is attained, in the first case through the struggle of the girl against the spirits of evil contained in the beryl-stone, and in the latter poem by the yielding of Lilith to the snake element in her nature. The notes for the proposed poems, *Michael Scott's Wooing* and *The Orchard Pit*, show that magic was to be the keynote of both. 'Tis a pity that they were never written. The few stanzas which we have of *The Orchard Pit* make us know something of what we have missed, and show clearly what the tone of the poem would have been. Take these as illustrative.

"Piled deep below the screening apple-branch  
They lie with bitter apples in their hands;  
And some are only ancient bones that blanch,  
And some had ships that last year's wind did launch,  
And some were yesterday the lords of lands.

In the soft dell, among the apple-trees,  
High up above the pit she stands,  
And there forever sings, who gave to these,  
That lie below, her magic hour of ease,  
And those her apples holden in their hands.

This in my dreams is shown me; and her hair  
Crosses my lips and draws my burning breath;  
Her song spreads golden wings upon the air,  
Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair,  
And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death."

Magic is a note to which Rossetti returns again and again, and we may find many snatches of it throughout his poems. This from *The Bride's Prelude* is unusually fine.

"I woke at midnight, cold and dazed;  
Because I found myself  
Seated upright, with bosom bare,  
Upon my bed, combing my hair,  
Ready to go, I knew not where."

That surely gives one the right thrill and throws open to the imagination the avenues of wonderland! Here is another bit, this time from *The Portrait*, which suggests the painting entitled *How They Met Themselves*. This picture is of two lovers, who, walking by night in a grove, are warned of impending death by suddenly meeting face to face the ghosts of themselves.

"a covert place  
Where you might think to find a din  
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame  
Wandering, and many a shape whose name  
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,  
*And your own footsteps meeting you,*  
And all things going as they came."

Magic and atmosphere are often very much at one; but perhaps we may say, though only in a very general way, that magic has to do with the struggle of the individual against some elusive and occult power, while atmosphere is the reflection of the state of a soul, on exterior things.

None surely of the longer poems is more the product of atmosphere than *The Bride's Prelude*. Just how Rossetti would have ended the poem, which was left fragmentary, it might be hard to say\*; but the clouds which have been gathering are surely storm-clouds, and the lightening flashes and the thunder groans. The situation becomes increasingly tense, and the crisis, had it come, must needs have been

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\*He has left a prose sketch of a proposed ending but how the finished poem would have compared with this sketch is impossible to tell.

sudden and violent. The Bride is about to be married to the man who had seduced and forsaken her, the man who had caused her such anguish that her child had been still-born, the man whom she has learned to hate and who has come back to marry her only for his own advantage. Before the wedding takes place the Bride feels that she must unbosom herself of her unhappy past to her sister who is just back from a convent and quite ignorant of the misfortune which has befallen the Bride. The distress of these two girls,—of the one because she must confess, of the other because she must hear what costs so much to confess,—is tenseness itself; and of this we are made aware, not by being told in so many words, but by finding it reflected in their reaction to their surroundings and in the correspondence of those surroundings with their own inner selves.

“‘Sister,’ said busy Amelotte  
To listless Aloyse;  
‘Along your wedding road the wheat  
Bends as to hear your horse’s feet,  
And the noonday stands still for heat.’”

In this very first stanza, we already know something, and it is a considerable something of these women, simply because the one is “busy” and the other “listless.” And how much the listlessness of Aloyse is heightened by the wheat’s bending to hear her horse’s feet, and by the noonday’s standing still for heat! And here is a splendid glimpse into the nature of the sister to whom the Bride felt she must confess: Among other objects is

“A slim-curved lute, which now,  
At Amelotte’s sudden passing there,  
Was swept in somehow unaware,  
And shook to music the close air.”

How could the Bride keep a secret from the girl at whose mere passing the lute-strings are stirred? And it is not because Amelotte is an inquisitive newsgatherer but only because she is strong and of a largeness of sympathy which unwittingly elicits confidence. The noonday heat is op-

pressive; but see how much more oppressive it becomes because the heart-sick Bride projects herself upon it!

"Beneath the drooping brows, the stir  
Of thought made noonday heavier.

Long sat she silent; and then raised  
Her head, with such a gasp  
As while she summoned breath to speak  
Fanned high that furnace in the cheek  
But sucked the heart-pulse cold and weak."

And see how her sad heart has colored the past seasons of her youth.

"(Oh gather round her now, all ye  
Past seasons of her fear,—  
Sick springs, and summers deadly cold!  
To flight your hovering wings unfold,  
For now your secret shall be told.

Ye many sunlights, barbed with darts  
Of dread detecting flame,—  
Gaunt moonlights that like sentinels  
Went past with iron clank of bells,—  
Draw round and render up your spells!)"

The Bride is about to speak, and is summoning all possible courage, but the silence itself weighs upon her and only renders her agony more acute. That moment is one of those in which seconds seem like minutes and minutes like hours, a subtle and awesome moment in which the scales are turned by a bird's song. The string cannot be tightened any more: either it is attuned or it must break.

"A bird had out its song and ceased  
Ere the bride spoke."

To make her sister's confession less painful, Amelotte avoids looking at her and conceals her own face in her hands. How intent she is upon hearing is reflected in her immobility.

"The bride took breath to pause; and turned  
Her gaze where Amelotte  
Knelt,—the gold hair upon her back  
Quite still in all its threads,—the track  
Of her still shadow sharp and black."

To listen to such a tale would in itself have been trying enough, but to listen without being able to see the speaker and to wait through the pauses was well-nigh terror.

"That listening without sight had grown  
To stealthily dread; and now  
That the one sound she had to mark  
Left her alone too, she was stark  
Afraid, as children in the dark.

Her fingers felt her temples beat:  
Then came that brain-sickness  
*Which thinks to scream and murmureth;*  
And pent between her hands the breath  
Was damp against her face like death."

Shame is a denizen of dark recesses and flees before sunshine as Satan is said to do at sight of a cross.

"Where Amelotte was sitting, all  
The light and warmth of day  
Were so upon her without shade,  
That the thing seemed by sunshine made  
Most foul and wanton to be said."

And once more we may know how stilly and oppressive this noonday is.

"Through the bride's lattice there crept in  
At whiles (from where the train  
Of minstrels, till the marriage-call  
Loitered at windows of the wall,)  
Stray lute-notes, sweet and musical.

They clung in the green growths and moss  
Against the outside stone;  
Low like dirge-wail or requiem  
They murmured, lost 'twixt leaf and stem:  
There was no wind to carry them.

We need not stop for illustrations of his atmosphere from others of Rossetti's poems: the *Bride's Prelude* has afforded us a sufficient store. And this atmosphere we have seen to be a subtle tone by which we may know a mood, for example, without being told of it. It is an analysis or presentation of the mood's reflection rather than of the mood itself.

I have hinted before at Rossetti's power to depict emotions. It is a unique note with him and one of his most characteristic. Moods are so much a part of him, so vital and keen a part of him, that he can articulate them perfectly. And the very fact, that in his painting, as in his poetry, he was forever concerned with the picturing of moods, made for that clearness and precision of presentation which are peculiar to him. Mood with him meant the soul become articulate, the soul reaching out to "the ultimate outpost of eternity;" and Art could not be the expression of anything less. That is why his achievement is always at so high a level: it is the interpretation of ecstasy; nay, it is ecstasy itself. And because ecstasy is momentary and must be caught in a breath, the lyric is its proper instrument, and Rossetti a lyric poet. His language may not always be spontaneous, in fact it rarely is; yet his inspiration is not only spontaneous, but deep-rooted and authentic; and the best possible proof of it is to be found in the large number of excellent sonnets which he has written. When one has molded his initial impulse into a good sonnet and a good poem, the core of his inspiration must indeed have been large and solid to withstand the shaping which the form has imposed upon it. So form, by the way, may be, among other things, an excellent acid with which the poet can try out his substance.

Mood is the stuff of poetry as action is of drama or clear sequence of logic; and it is mood which we have in the "perfect grief" of *The Woodspurge*, the listlessness of *Autumn Idleness*, the intense yearning of *Broken Music*, the despair of *Lost On Both Sides*, and in the bulk of what Rossetti has left us. And as those conflicting hopes which, in

their quest for peace, only frustrate one another, so will the writers who heed other voices than those of the moods, fall short of their goal—Poetry, wander aimlessly,

“and wind among  
Its bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns.”

## CHAPTER II

### CRAFTSMANSHIP

"A sonnet is a moment's monument,—  
Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,  
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,  
Of its own arduous fulness reverent:  
Carve it in ivory or in ebony,  
As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see  
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

A sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,—its converse, to what Power 'tis due:—  
Whether for tribute to the august appeals  
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,  
It serve; or 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,  
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death."

It would be difficult indeed to find any precise literary influences in the work of Rossetti. One rarely meets with so original an artist. He was too strong, I might almost say too dominant a man to borrow much from others. At least one writer has sought to establish Rossetti's indebtedness to Dante; but perhaps the only sane comparison which could be made between these two would be one of personalities. Both were born leaders of men, both were creatures of strong emotions, artists thoroughly enamored of their art, and men given to melancholy contemplation. Yet Dante seems to have been shrewd, a man more like the generality of men, one whose daily life was very much like that of his fellows, and one intensely interested in the life about him, perhaps because it affected him so intimately. As artists, the two poets resemble each other. Both are masters of the tongue which they make their medium; both are fond of symbolism; both have sweet, yet strong and direct voices; both are mystics; and both excel in the use of figurative speech, and very markedly so in their use of verisimilitude. But that is as far as the comparison should go; and as for

borrowings from Dante, you will find none in Rossetti. What will perhaps remind you most often of Dante, in reading Rossetti, will be the highly colored mediaeval background. In content the English poet has virtually nothing in common with the Florentine; yet if one is bound to find resemblances the content of Rossetti's work is more like that of Petrarch's than that of Dante's. This resemblance is a natural enough condition. The majority of Petrarch's poems, like the majority of Rossetti's, were written in praise of woman; and since Beauty, man's capacity for it, and the terms in which it can be expressed are about the same throughout human experience, is it to be wondered at if two poets say similar things, and in something of the same manner? In concluding this appropriately brief discussion of literary influences, I might say that while Dante distinguished between the earthly and the heavenly Aphrodite, in both Petrarch and Rossetti the two are fused and become one.

The predominant characteristics of Rossetti's language are melody, sonority, color, and virility. It is the combination of these qualities which is peculiar to him and which makes his product unique. Melody we find in innumerable poets; sonority and color in a Keats or a Yeats; and virility in a Byron, a Browning, or a Swinburne; but all these qualities in a single poet, you find perhaps but once in a people's literature, and when you add directness and concentration, then you must turn to Rossetti. How far his language was influenced by inherited tendencies and by associations with Italian it would be impossible to say; but I think that there can be little question as to a resemblance between the sonorous elements of the two. He has certain expressions, too, which might be reminiscent of Italian phrases; I mean, for example, such an expression as "remembering her" which savors rather strongly of *ricordandosi*.

To the painter-poet's love of color, we may perhaps attribute his fondness for, and marvellous command of qualifying words: words deliberately chosen, but chosen out of an abundance and with an unparalleled sense for intrinsic

beauty and poetic suggestiveness. Take such words as these italicised here.

"long known to thee  
By *flying* hair and *fluttering* hem . . . . .

.....

How passionately and *irretrievably*  
In what *fond* flight, how many ways and days."

"The *ground-whirl* of the perished leaves of Hope"

"And round their *narrow* lips the mold falls *close*."

In the choice of the "mot juste," as the French Parnassians called it, I know of no poet who can afford the reader anything like the wealth of overwhelming and exhilarating surprises—the surprises which chill one's marrow—that are to be met with in Rossetti. In reading other poets you say, "how aptly chosen;" but in Rossetti you say not only "how apt," but also "who but this man could or would have chosen such a word!" Take a few verses at random to illustrate what I mean.

"This day at least was Summer's paramour,  
*Sun-colored* to the imperishable core"

"How should I reach so far, who cannot weigh  
Tomorrow's *dower* by *gage* of yesterday"

"Those unknown things or these things *overknown*"

"Sleepless with *cold commemorative* eyes"

"And in *regenerate rapture* turns my face  
Upon the *devious coverts* of *dismay*."

The reader may better appreciate how much is gained in virility, conciseness, and suggestiveness, in such verses as the last two quoted above, if he will think to what length most poets would have spun out the matter which they contain.

There is always the danger in art that the master of this or that phase of technique may lose his sense of proportion and become the slave of that of which he had been the master. Rossetti did not escape this danger altogether nor did he ever succumb to it to any great extent. His use of compound nouns and adjectives is sometimes too noticeable, but is not a serious offense. He risked more in shifting the tonic accent of words. It takes time to grow accustomed to "life-fountain;" but on the other hand, one must confess that in many instances, as in "wingfeathers," the novel effect is altogether pleasing. Verses in which there is an annoying repetition of a sound are surely out of place in the sonnet.

"Stoops as it swoops, with cheek that laughs and burns."

But sins of this kind are few and surely negligible in view of Rossetti's work as a whole.

Despite the fact that much of his work is mediaeval in setting, his vocabulary does not contain many archaisms. His atmosphere, as has already been pointed out, he achieves not by the use of antiquated language, but by investing his scenery with moods, and by the skill with which he strikes the right key and then keeps to the pitch. Inversions he disliked and avoided, and it is pleasurable, to say the least, to read a poet whose delivery is so direct.

No one has come away from a study of Plato and Dante without wondering at the splendor and originality of their figurative speech; and it has long seemed to me that excellence in the use of such speech was a mark of real poetry. That Plato was a poet, and a great one, will be patent to all unless they exact versification of poetry; for what poet has ever dreamed more beautiful dreams than those of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*, or a more elaborate one than that of the *Republic*. In beauty and originality of figurative speech Rossetti is surely akin to Plato. I have alluded before to the strength and resemblance of Dante and Rossetti in their use of versimilitude; and the reader of these poets is not likely to forget readily this from the *Inferno*

*"Poi che l'un piè per girsene sospese  
Maometto mi disse esta parola"*

or things like the following, from sonnets of Rossetti:

*"The lost days of my life until today  
What were they, could I see them on the street  
Lie as they fell?"*

*"Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air  
Between the scripted petals softly blown  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown"*

The comparison might be extended further, and we might say that both poets excelled markedly in the use of figurative speech in general; and since, in speaking of Rossetti's imagination, I treated of his use of verisimilitude, I hardly need add anything here. In his other figures of speech we shall meet with the same sort of surprise as that which we found in his "mot juste," only in a greater degree. See what picturesque imagery there is in figures like these!

*"A sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,—its converse, to what Power 'tis due"*

*"On these debateable borders of the year  
Spring's foot half falters"*

*"Alas for all  
The loves that from his hand proud Youth lets fall,  
Even as the beads of a told rosary!"*

And how profoundly and poignantly does this next delve into the past of our hearts, rouse regrets for our lost youth, and reanimate days and delights which had long been forgot!

*"intense  
As instantaneous penetrating sense  
In Spring's birth-hour of other Springs gone by."*

There need be no dearth of illustrative matter in dealing with such a phase of Rossetti's genius at this. There is al-

ways an abundance, and an abundance to spare. The only difficulty will come in limiting oneself to so little, when there is so much.

There is nothing in Rossetti's life which would lead one to call him a lover of the out-of-doors—for most of his life was spent within a studio; yet when he did come in contact with Nature, his eye was keen to observe and his heart to remember; and what he saw with the outer eye, he colored with the eye of the imagination.

“Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly  
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky”

And what lover of Nature, poet though he might be, would have observed this?

“The deer gaze calling, dappled white and dun,  
As if, being foresters of old, the sun  
Had marked them with the shade of forest-leaves.”

Then for originality and remoteness from the commonplace of life, this figure is unique even among Rossetti's.

“Even as, heavy-curved,  
Stooping against the wind, a charioteer  
Is snatched from out his chariot by the hair,  
So shall Time be; and as the void car, hurled  
Abroad by reinless steeds, even so the world.”

A notable feature of some of Rossetti's poems is the refrain. The use of a refrain was far from being an innovation with him, but what was new was the way in which he used it. Others had used it for rhythmical effects, but in his hands it took on new possibilities and new functions. He makes it a sort of antistrophe, the subtle echo of the stanza, or the voice of a vague emotion either roused by the stanza or complementary to it. It resembles a dominant undertone in music, and is very suggestively described in his own definition of the refrain, in the translation of Villon's ballade of the dead ladies, where he calls it an “over-word.” *A Death Parting* exemplifies admirably the “over-word” type of Rossetti's refrains.

"Leaves and rain and the days of the year,  
 (Water-willow and wellaway,)  
 All these fall, and my soul gives ear,  
 And she is hence who once was here.  
 (With a wind blown night and day.)

Ah! but now, for a secret sign,  
 (The willow's wan and the water white,)  
 In the held breath of the day's decline  
 Her very face seemed pressed to mine.  
 (With a wind blown day and night.)

O love, of my death my life is fain;  
 (The willows wave on the water-way,)  
 Your cheek and mine are cold in the rain,  
 But warm they'll be when we meet again.  
 (With a wind blown night and day.)

Mists are heaved and cover the sky;  
 (The willows wail in the waning light.)  
 O loose your lips, leave space for a sigh,—  
 They seal my soul, I cannot die.  
 (With a wind blown night and day.)

Leaves and rain and the days of the year,  
 (Water-willow and wellaway,)  
 All still fall, and I still give ear,  
 And she is hence, and I am here.  
 (With a wind blown night and day.)

In other poems—such as *Troy Town*, *Eden Bower*, and *Sister Helen*,—the refrain takes on a distinctly dramatic function and bears to the stanza and to the poem as a whole a relationship akin to that which the chorus bore to the main dialogue in the Greek classic tragedy. In *Troy Town* it lacks the musical qualities which Rossetti's refrains generally possess; but for all that it carries dramatic force and adds perceptibly to the climax of the poem. In fact much of the poem's significance hinges upon those words

"O Troy's down  
 Tall Troy's on fire!"

It is the love of Helen and Paris which will prove to be the bane of Troy, so when once that love is kindled, the town is doomed, and the imminence of its fate broods over it

from the very first stanza. The poem gains in intensity too from the refrain-like repetition of "heart's desire."

The refrain of Sister Helen changes from stanza to stanza to meet the demands made upon it by the progression of the poem; and in all of these poems the refrain—like a wave gathering violence with every dip—swells and accumulates the dramatic power until it breaks with the climax. The following stanzas from *Eden Bower* illustrate very forcibly the resemblance of the refrain to the Greek chorus. The main voice says:

"'Lo! two babes for Eve and for Adam!"

and the chorus:

(And O the bower and hour!)

the main voice:

'Lo! sweet snake, the travail and treasure,—  
Two men-children born for their pleasure!"

'The first is Cain and the second is Abel:'

the chorus:

(Eden bower's in flower.)

the main voice:

'The soul of one shall be made thy brother,  
And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other!"

the chorus:

(And O the bower and the hour!)"

The sonnet must enter and take a large part in any discussion of Rossetti's art, because it is a form for which his contemplative genius was particularly fitted, and one in which he is universally acknowledged to have been a master.

In speaking of the sonnet we are altogether too much given to laying stress upon the rhymes, as if the fourteen

verses correctly rhymed constituted a sonnet. Happily the sonnet is something more than rhymes, and I shall try to show what Rossetti thought it to be.

It might be extravagant to say that one feature of the sonnet is more important than another, so much is the effect of the whole dependent upon the proper balance and harmony of its parts; but if not more important, its inner structure is surely full as important as its outer. Naturally, the fourteen verses, of a certain type, rhyming in a certain way, are the sonnet pattern; but they are not the sonnet. It is the material, the stuff of which one weaves that makes the difference in cloths; and it is fundamental brainwork—intellectual and emotional—which really makes the difference in sonnet writing. It goes without saying that you must weave your material before you have cloth, you must work according to a plan, a pattern; and likewise in sonnet-writing you must adopt the given pattern, since what we mean by a sonnet is a *poem* whose externals are the fourteen verses, the rhymes and the rest. You may, in your iconoclasm, decide to call a stone a tree, and a twenty-verse composition a sonnet; but to most mortals a stone will remain a stone and a sonnet a fourteen-verse poem till doomsday.

It is well to remember that a thing may be poetic without being lyrical, or lyrical without being poetic. The poetic quality has to do with imaginative suggestiveness, the lyrical with spontaneity of expression. Now the sonnet is contemplative rather than spontaneous, condensed rather than effusive, forceful and poignant, yet restrained, subtle, and austere.

Any attempt to prove the absolute superiority of the Petrarchan over the Shakespearian sonnet would be futile; for the one is superior as a Petrarchan and the other as a Shakespearian sonnet. Relatively speaking, however, and with the qualities spoken of above as indispensable attributes, one must admit that the Petrarchan model has yielded the more satisfactory results. To say that the Shakespearian is incapable of the necessary qualities would be going too far; but what can be safely said, I think, is that

thus far, in the history of the sonnet in English literature, it has not achieved those qualities. If it was never meant to, then the question is at an end; and we may say that from the point of view of the sonnet as a poem excelling in condensation, sonority, restraint, and stateliness, the Petrarchan model has been superior. Too often in the Shakespearian sonnet the three quatrains have been mere bolstering for the crack of the whip of the more or less loosely connected couplet; and this charge might well apply to many, very many, of the Elizabethan sonnets, and, with some grounds, even to that one of Drayton's which Rossetti himself admired so much. What he found so admirable in it was doubtless the splendid analysis of a mood.

To Rossetti the sonnet was almost always bipartite, as to both content and form; and outwardly these two parts were octave and sestet. In many of his sonnets one of these parts presented the thesis of mood or thought, while the other gave his emotional reaction to it. *Soul's Beauty* illustrates this type very well. In the octave we are shown who Lady Beauty is; and the sestet reveals how man reacts emotionally when brought in contact with her. Others of his sonnets present a theme from two different angles, as in that on the sonnet which heads this chapter. Of this sonnet, we can say further that it is the only sonnet on the sonnet which really tells us what the sonnet is. Wordsworth's "Scorn not the sonnet" is structurally a failure, and a mighty poor justification of the sonnet. It is not bipartite, has nothing of the advance and recoil movement, and in substance is merely a more or less imaginative statement of what part the sonnet has played in the production of certain poets. It contains, to be sure, the splendid verses on Dante, Spencer, and Milton; but were it not for these verses of saving grace, what would there be to the poem? His sonnet beginning, "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room," is structurally much better; but that too gives us no inkling as to what the sonnet is. Eugene Lee-Hamilton's, "Fourteen small brodered berries on the hem" is built very much like Wordsworth's "Scorn not the sonnet," in fact savors strongly of being an imitation of it, but gives us no more

idea of what the sonnet is than does Wordsworth's.

Almost the same objection could be made to Gilder's "What is a sonnet?," except that it does suggest that a sonnet is "a two-edged sword." But now turn to Rossetti's, and you will find not only the spiritual significance of the sonnet

"A sonnet is a moment's monument  
Memorial from the soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour"

but also the vital and primal element of its being: its face and converse.

"A sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,—its converse to what Power 'tis due."

It is this bipartite nature, then, which is the true seal of the sonnet; and Rossetti's success as a sonneteer was due in no small part to the fact that he recognized and lived up to this truth. Of his sonnets, there are few indeed, (*A Match With the Moon* is an example) in which there is not a distinct recoil of the one part on the other. This bipartite feature has much to do with giving his sonnets their close-knit qualities. And with what an admirable sense of proportion the materials are distributed, so that no one part of the sonnet will be thin nor another too heavy! With all their ornateness and elaborate details these sonnets stand solid, nobly erect, and splendidly poised. The emotional stress increases as the sonnet progresses, till, with the last verse, the heart of the reader is launched into the clear ether of the emotions and imagination. Here too the element of sonority is present and predominates as nowhere else in Rossetti's poems. To list the sonorous verses would be to list the great body of his sonnets; but many of them are not merely sonorous: they are unapproachable in their poetic and imaginative suggestiveness.

"The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope"

"Speechless while things forgotten call to us"

"The very sky and sea-line of her soul"

"Faint as shed flowers, the attenuated dream"

"Shadows and shoals that edge eternity"

"Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes"

"The wandering of his feet perpetually."

And these are only a few of the many. Tell me of another poet in whose work one can find verses like these—verses so intrinsically beautiful, so instinct with the breath of pure poetry, so vital and complete in themselves that they satisfy one as does an entire poem! Surely, in such flights the poet has reached

"The ultimate outpost of eternity."

To me at least these verses mean more than do all possible "lyric cries." The "lyric cry" can rouse one, but it has no carrying power; while Rossetti's verses lift and sustain one over unimagined waters to unimagined shores. I believe that Rossetti is not only a master of the sonnet, but the greatest that we have had.

## CHAPTER III

### TRANSLATIONS

"A little wild bird sometimes at my ear  
Sings his own little verses very clear:  
Others sing louder that I do not hear.

For singing loudly is not singing well;  
But ever by the song that's soft and low  
The master-singer's voice is plain to tell.  
Few have it, and yet all are masters now,  
And each of them can trill out what he calls  
His ballads, canzonets, and madrigals.

The world with masters is so cover'd o'er,  
There is no room for pupils any more."

(Early Italian Poets—Anonymous ballata.)

It is almost a commonplace that good translations of poetry are perhaps even more rare than poetry itself. The truth is that to be a good translator, one must be a poet; and poets—at least ours—rarely devote much of their effort to translation. They are so rapt in their own dreams that they look upon translation—if they condescend to it at all—as a thing to be done when inspiration for other work is lacking. Yet translation is not to be utterly despised, for it requires greater versatility and is far more difficult than is generally suspected. It is for this reason that we have so few first-class translations. We have some in which the foreign verse has been more or less successfully imitated; others in which the flavor of the original has survived; but very few in which both are to be found, and fewer still which make English poetry. The reasons for these conditions are varied. In the first place the prosody of the one tongue may differ radically from that of the other; secondly, poets are forever striving for the "mot juste," a thing which is of the very essence of the language and virtually

intranslatable; and thirdly where atmosphere, that quality so dependent on the suggestive power of words, is to be rendered the difficulties become almost insurmountable. Consequently, almost the worst that can be said for verse translations—and it is constantly said, as if it were a praiseworthy feature—is that they have been done in the original metres. Rarely, very rarely, you will find a writer who can make not only a metrical translation, but also a translation which is poetry. Rossetti is one of these.

In the preface to *The Early Italian Poets* he says: "The life-blood of rhymed translation is this—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one"; and it is for this very reason that those of us who have no access to Persian, for example, are not much concerned with the original of the Rubaiyat: we are satisfied that Fitzgerald's translation is a magnificent poem in itself. So with Rossetti's translations; he has not only done justice to the originals, he has even improved upon them at times. In an endeavor to make his book comprehensive and really representative of the early poetry of Italy, he has included much which is of an inferior quality; but though the sources be indifferent the translations are always well done, and make us wonder at the patience and enthusiasm of the translator. Of poets before Dante, there are very few—Fazio degli Uberti, Franco Sacchetti, and a half dozen others in an occasional poem—who were worthy of the translator. As to the "*Vita Nuova*," it is by far the finest thing in the book. Since the first appearance of Rossetti's volume in 1861, that little book of Dante's has been translated many times; but the reader who would catch the spirit of Dante, and yet must forego the original, must go to Rossetti. Here the affinity of the two poets, Rossetti's love and understanding of Dante, his love of woman, his ability as poet, and his skill in catching and reproducing the spirit and letter of the original have made his the unmatched translation.

"Poetry not being an exact science, literalness of rendering is altogether secondary.... I say *literalness*—not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing." But read his translations, and you will be surprised not only at their fidelity

but also at the remarkable degree of their literality. Comparisons are rarely sane or justifiable; but with the original as a definite starting point and the endowing of a fresh nation "with one more possession of beauty" as a goal, it is possible to measure the translator's achievement with his aim. Therefore, it will perhaps be profitable, and at least not altogether amiss, to compare Rossetti's with the translations of others. Here, for example, are the original, Byron's rendering, and that of Rossetti.

"Quando risposi, cominciai: 'O lasso,  
 Quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio  
 Menó costoro al doloroso passo!  
 Poi mi rivolsi a loro, e parlai io,  
 E cominciai: 'Francesca, i tuoi martiri  
 A lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio.  
 Ma dimmi: al tempo de' dolci sospiri,  
 A che e come concedette amore,  
 Che conoscesti i dubbiosi desiri?'  
 Ed ella a me: 'Nessun maggior dolore,  
 Che ricordarsi del tempo felice,  
 Nella miseria; e ciò sa il tuo dottore.  
 Ma se a conoscer la prima radice  
 Del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,  
 Faró come colui che piange e dice.  
 Noi leggevamo un giorno per diletto  
 Di Lancilotto, come amor lo strinse;  
 Soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto.  
 Per più fiate gli occhi ci sospinse  
 Quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
 Ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.  
 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
 Esser baciato da cotanto amante,  
 Questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
 La bocca mi bació tutto tremante:  
 Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse!  
 Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.'  
 Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,  
 L'altro piangeva sí che di pietade  
 Io venni men, cosí com' io morisse;  
 E caddi, come corpo morto cade."

(Byron)

".....Alas! unto such ill  
 How many sweet thoughts, what strong ecstasies,  
 Led these their evil fortune to fulfill!  
 And then I turn'd unto their side my eyes,  
 And said, 'Francesca, thy sad destinies  
 Have made me sorrow till the tears arise.  
 But tell me, in the season of sweet sighs,  
 By what and how thy love to passion rose,  
 So as his dim desires to recognize?'  
 Then she to me: 'The greatest of all woes  
 Is to remind us of our happy days  
 In misery, and that thy teacher knows.  
 But if to learn our passion's first root preys  
 Upon thy spirit with such sympathy,  
 I will do even as he who weeps and says.  
 We read one day for pastime, seated nigh,  
 Of Lancilot, how love enchain'd him too.  
 We were alone, quite unsuspectingly.  
 But oft our eyes met, and our cheeks in hue  
 All o'er discolour'd by that reading were;  
 But one point only wholly us o'erthrew;  
 When we read the long-sigh'd-for smile of her,  
 To be thus kiss'd by such devoted lover,  
 He who from me can be divided ne'er  
 Kissed my mouth, trembling in the act all over.  
 Accursed was the book and he who wrote!  
 That day no further leaf we did uncover.'—  
 While thus one spirit told us of their lot,  
 The other wept, so that with pity's thralls  
 I swoon'd as if by death I had been smote,  
 And fell down even as a dead body falls."

(Rossetti)

"When I made answer, I began: 'Alas!  
 How many sweet thoughts and how much desire  
 Led these two onward to the dolorous pass!'—  
 Then turned to them, as who would fain inquire,  
 And said: 'Francesca, these thine agonies  
 Wring tears for pity and grief that they inspire:—  
 But tell me,—in the season of sweet sighs,  
 When and what way did Love instruct you so  
 That he in your vain longings made you wise?'  
 Then she to me: 'There is no greater woe

Than the remembrance brings of happy days  
 In Misery; and this thy guide doth know.  
 But if the first beginnings to retrace  
 Of our sad love can yield thee solace here,  
 So will I be as one that weeps and says.  
 One day we read, for pastime and sweet cheer,  
 Of Lancelot, how he found Love tyrannous:  
 We were alone and without any fear.  
 Our eyes were drawn together, reading thus,  
 Full oft, and still our cheeks would pale and glow;  
 But one sole point it was that conquered us.  
 For when we read of that great lover, how  
 He kissed the smile which he had longed to win, —  
 Then he whom naught can sever from me now  
 For ever, kissed my mouth, all quivering.  
 A Galahalt was the book, and he that writ:  
 Upon that day we read no more therein.  
 At the tale told, while one soul uttered it,  
 The other wept: a pang so pitiable  
 That I was seized, like death, in swooning fit,  
 And even as a dead body falls, I fell."

Byron's translation is not to be despised, though it has hardly been faithful to the verses of Dante. It lacks the simplicity and the delicate pathos of the original and quite misses the tone of it. And in spite of the fact that Byron claims to have done the passage "into *cramp* English, line for line, and rhyme for rhyme," it is quite evident in such verses as these that he has not been literal.

"What strong ecstasies  
 Led these their evil fortune to fulfill!"

Then too he has too many inversions and too much which smacks of Pope and the eighteenth century. But I have already pointed to the chief reason why he did not do justice to his original: it was too fine, too delicate for his rather crude hand. He was much better fitted for Pulci's *Morgante* than for the Francesca episode.

Now if we turn to Rossetti's translation we shall see that in the very first tercet we have what is virtually a word for word rendering. And throughout, the passage is keyed to Dante's pathetic note and never once goes false. It is this

very quality of fidelity, not only to the body, but also to the soul of his original that makes Rossetti excel as a translator. Byron is struggling with a metre which clearly is too much for him; while Rossetti takes it surprisingly easily. What of good there is in Byron's translation is Dante's; but in Rossetti's there is nothing which makes us feel that it is a translation. It has passed through the fibre of his personality and bears the stamp of it. If one objected that Byron's version was likewise stamped with *his* personality, then I would say "so much the worse for Byron; this is only one proof more of how ill-fitted he was to translate Dante."

One wonders why anyone should need or dare translate Villon's *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis* after it had once been done by Rossetti; and he wonders still more when he reads Andrew Lang's translation. Lang's facile verse could hardly have been less suitably employed anywhere. See, for instance, whether this stanza of Lang's does justice to Villon.

"Nay, tell me now in what strange air  
The Roman Flora dwells today.  
Where Archippiada hides, and where  
Beautiful Thais has passed away?  
Whence answers Echo, afield, astray,  
By mere or stream,—around, below?  
Lovelier she than a woman of clay;  
Nay, but where is the last year's snow?"

"Dictes-moy où, n'en quel pays,  
Est Flora, la belle Romaine;  
Archipiada, ne Thais,  
Qui fut sa cousine germaine;  
Echo, parlant quand bruyt on maine  
Dessus rivièrre ou sus estan,  
Qui beauté eut trop plus qu'humaine?  
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!"

Do you think, for example, that

"Nay, tell me now in what strange air  
The Roman Flora dwells today"

says what Villon says in

“Dictes-moy où, n'en quel pays,  
Est Flora, la belle Romaine”?

That “what strange air” is some distance away, to be sure, from “n'en quel pays!” And do you get in “Lovelier she than a woman of clay” even the clay of “Qui beauté eut trop plus qu'humaine?” This is being neither literal nor faithful to the spirit of the original. But consider Rossetti's stanza.

“Tell me now in what hidden way is  
Lady Flora the lovely Roman?  
Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,  
Neither of them the fairer woman?  
Where is Echo, beheld of no man,  
Only heard on river and mere,—  
She whose beauty was more than human?...  
But where are the snows of yesteryear?”

Here surely is the voice of a master interpreting that of another. Take Lang's best verse “Nay, but where is the last year's snow,” and it is trivial and choppy when compared with “But where are the snows of yesteryear.” Then in Rossetti's

“Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,  
Neither of them the fairer woman”

we have a splendidly suggestive interpretation of Villon's

“Archipiada, ne Thais,  
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,”

one in which he makes the women's kinship one of beauty: Hipparchia is Thais' first cousin in beauty, that is, she is her equal, or as Rossetti puts it

“Neither of them the fairer woman.”

The “envois” of the two translators need only be put side by side, without comment.

(Lang)

"Prince, all this week thou need'st not pray,  
 Nor yet this year the thing to know.  
 One burden answers, ever and aye,  
 'Nay, but where is the last year's snow?'"

(Rossetti)

"Nay, never ask this week, fair lord,  
 Where they are gone, nor yet this year,  
 Except with this for an overword,—  
 But where are the snows of yesteryear?"

In the last of the three major stanzas, where the poem's poignancy reaches its climax in

"Où sont-ils, Vierge souveraine,"

Lang dawdles with his easy rhymes and takes no notice of this supreme cry, while Rossetti renders it thus admirably,

"Mother of God, where are they then?"

Enough of comparisons; but before leaving Villon let me call my reader's attention to Rossetti's admirable rendering of a verse from the *Lay ou Plustost Rondeau*.

"Deux estions, et n'avions qu'ung cuer"  
 "Two we were, and the heart was one."

In the translation of Villon's ballade and the Francesca episode we have veritable "tours de force." Surprisingly literal entirely faithful, they are splendid pieces of English poetry. I know of but one translation which can move and delight me as does the original, and that is Rossetti's version of Villon's ballade.

I have said little enough of *The Early Italian Poets* but that little may be enough. The book contains Rossetti's version of the "Vita Nuova," and that in itself would make it worthwhile. The pity is that more of the poets represented were not worthy of their translator—he who gave himself to them with such sympathy, enthusiasm, and self-

effacement, as only a great artist could give. In his preface he says "...I know there is no great stir to be made by launching afresh, on high seas busy with new traffic, the ships which have been long out-stripped and the ensigns which are grown strange;" and those memorable words may perhaps be answered in those of a scholar who said that many of us owed our first love of Italian poetry to Rossetti's beautiful book. In his translations, as in his original poetry, he showed that rare good sense which led him to select what was best suited to his beauty-loving, melancholy, and contemplative genius; and to this recognition of his power and limitations his art—including his translations—owes much of its merit.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LYRICS

"Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,  
A-top on the topmost twig—which the pluckers forgot somehow,—  
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none could get it till now."

It was perhaps impossible for the 19th century to judge or appreciate Rossetti,—the century which thought that it had found the Absolute in, what proved to be a half-god, science, and the dreamer who could live full as satisfactorily whether the sun went round the earth or the earth round the sun. Today we realize that the Absolute is still at large, and we can see that the man, whom his contemporaries called an anachronism, was really a priest of the one god which can satisfy the aspirations of man—Idealism.

To his fellows intellectual meant scientific, and so they called him sensuous. A voluptuary he surely was; but so are all artists and mystics, even the ascetic to whom his very asceticism is a source of voluptuous pleasure. Yet Rossetti was not merely sensuous, and we shall see, if we have not already seen, that he was one of the most thoughtful of our lyrics poets.

In imaginative power, technical skill, and perfect articulation of a basic inspiration, he never surpassed in his later work what he had achieved in *The Blessed Damosel*. His added years gave him a more profound sense of the pathetic, a more searching analysis of moods, a greater wealth and depth of feeling; but the beginnings of all these qualities were already apparent in the product of his youth. What a beautiful dream is this of the maiden in heaven praying that her earthly lover may join her, and that there in God's sight their love, their earthly love, may be made eternal! And it is this very quality of earthliness which gives the poem its sympathetic and appealing note. Love, like Art and all other forms of religion is selfish, and what the lovers desire is, not a new and spiritual existence, but an

eternity of the love which they had known on earth. The maiden in heaven is still clothed in the beautiful body which her lover had known and loved.

“And still she bowed herself and stooped  
Out of the circling charm;  
Until her bosom must have made  
The bar she leaned on warm.”

What a perfect mingling is this of the Pagan body and the Christian soul, of the earthly and heavenly Aphrodite, of Francesca and Beatrice! And to the poet, the lover, could any creed be more satisfying? Love to Rossetti was the summum bonum, the Absolute,

“The ultimate outpost of eternity,”

and he recognized no creed but this. To love woman, or Art, or earth, was to love God himself.

“Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.”

*The Portrait* has a distinct kinship with *The Blessed Damosel*; but in the former it is the lover on earth who, gazing on the portrait which he had painted of his beloved, grieves for her who is now in heaven. There is about the poem a contemplative melancholy, as though the lover were sorrowing for one long since gone, and a music as of a requiem or far-away bells. What sad resignation, what keen and vain longing, what “perfect grief” in the closing stanza!

How strangely and sadly prophetic these poems appear to be! Written in his youth, they would seem to belong rather to the lonely years of his later life, when the poet and painter, mourning for the woman whom he had loved and lost, might say:

"This is her picture as she was:  
It seems a thing to wonder on,  
As though mine image in the glass  
Should tarry when myself am gone.  
I gaze until she seems to stir,—  
Until mine eyes almost aver  
That now, even now, the sweet lips part  
To breathe the words of the sweet heart:—  
And yet the earth is over her."

Not only is Rossetti thoughtful, but in some of his work he deals frankly with questions like those of life and death. He does not, in the manner of the metaphysician, postulate a hypothesis and then carry it out to a logical conclusion; but he does present a problem in such a way as to make us know what he has been thinking and to suggest new possible avenues for our own thought. In *The Card Dealer* we learn that what we know as life and death are both but phases of a larger activity, a larger life; and the Card Dealer, in whom we recognize Fate, deals out impassively the cards which mean life or death for us. Perhaps, after all, the life and death of the individual are only kindred activities of the great Oversoul.

The poem is terse and compact, and wrought of such beauty and imagination as this:

"Could you not drink her gaze like wine?  
Yet though its splendors swoon  
Into the silence languidly  
As a tune into a tune,  
Those eyes unravel the coiled night  
And know the stars at noon."

And there is a note of true magic in:

"We play together, she and we,  
Within a vain strange land."

There is not merely imaginative suggestiveness in *The Sea-Limits*, but a core of solid thought.

"Consider the sea's listless chime:  
Time's self it is, made audible,—  
The murmur of the earth's own shell."

As one might gather from the beach a shell and catch in its conch an echo of the sea's roar, so, if one could listen at the earth's shell, one would hear in the voices of wood, sea, and men kindred expression of the instinct to be. Man is no more a phase of life than are tree and wave.

"Gather a shell from the strown beach  
And listen at its lips: they sigh  
The echo of the whole sea's speech.  
And all mankind is thus at heart  
Not anything but what thou art:  
And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each."

Rossetti seems to have been forever fluctuating between an emotionalism, which looked to a life after death, and a sound practical sense which looked fact and truth full in the face, knew them for what they were and realized that all we actually know is that this life *is*, and that it *is* because we sense that it *is*. Belief—for we have no knowledge of it—in a life other than this, in a better, a compensating life is the creed of those dissatisfied with the present life; and in this belief Rossetti often indulged; but in his saner, his intellectual moments, he looks not at but through hope, and sees man as a helpless mote momentarily expressing a grain of that activity which we call life. Nowhere has he more beautifully, clearly, forcibly, and completely enunciated this than in his matchless *Cloud Confines*; and that the poem has never been more popular is a sad commentary on the taste and intelligence of lovers of poetry. Who that has read such lines as these can ever forget them?

"War that shatters her slain,  
And peace that grinds them as grain."

And if any verses whatsoever are worthy of remembrance or can be said to be inspired or to contain solid lyric thought, what of these?

"What of the heart of love  
That bleeds in thy breast, O Man?—  
Thy kisses snatched 'neath the ban  
Of fangs that mock them above;  
Thy bells prolonged unto knells,  
Thy hope that a breath dispels,  
Thy bitter forlorn farewells  
And the empty echoes thereof?—

Still we say as we go,—  
'Strange to think by the way,  
Whatever there is to know,  
That shall we know one day.'

The sky leans dumb on the sea,  
Aweary with all its wings;  
And oh! the song the sea sings  
Is dark everlastingly,  
Our past is clean forgot,  
Our present is and is not,  
Our future's a sealed seedplot,  
And what betwixt them are we?—

We who say as we go,—  
'Strange to think by the way,  
Whatever there is to know,  
That shall we know one day'."

Such, I think, was Rossetti's creed; and it would be well to remember that man's belief in life after death may mean to the artist potential poetic material rather than actual conviction. Even broken-down creeds may not be devoid of beauty.

These three poems, *The Card Dealer*, *The Sea Limits*, and *Cloud Confines*, I have chosen to speak of because they are among the finest of Rossetti's lyrics, and more particularly because their fundamental brainwork is thought, not emotion. That the thought has been emotionally fused and wrought goes without saying; else we would not have the perfect poems that these are. Yet, it is not in such performances alone, or even primarily, that his claim, and it is a very large one, to intellectuality lies, but also and rather in the analysis and portrayal of moods, of which I have already spoken and in which he excels so preëminently.

Nothing could be truer to spiritual experience than such an emotion as that of which *Sudden Light* is fashioned. From the eyes of how many a lover has some veil fallen, when at a swallow's soar his beloved's "neck turned so!" And to one so suddenly, so subtly, so convincingly made aware of a former existence and a former love, what can there be but a questioning of the future?

"Has this been thus before?  
And shall not thus time's eddying flight  
Still with our lives our loves restore  
In death's despite,  
And day and night yield one delight once more?"

In the hedonistic enjoyment of the moment, comes the melancholy truth that life, whether it be of joy or of sorrow, is passing away; and even in love there must be the stoicism which can put by love when its hour has past. It is this sense of the immanence of sorrow in pleasure which makes *A Little While* one of the most poignant of Rossetti's lyrics.

"Not yet the end: be our lips dumb  
In smiles a little season yet:  
I'll tell thee when the end is come,  
How we may best forget."

Yet even though a man speak in that timeless and immortal tongue, fools will still label him "minor," "victorian," and "anachronistic!"

Here is a "landscape," presented within the narrow compass of two lines, which the greatest masters of perspective and color might envy, and the like of which they have perhaps never achieved!

"Tonight this sunset spreads two golden wings  
Cleaving the western sky."

As one reads *Sunset Wings*, one feels and hears and sees the "winnowings of birds," the day's last hour dying "in rings of strenuous flight," "the sway of homeward pinions," "the clouds of starlings . . . clamorous like mill-waters at

wild play," the "wrangling rout" in the trees, the "whirr within," and the "one great puff of wings" with which "the swarm heaves away." Then the mind turning back, sees, through a heart full of sad yearning, in the flight of those rooks a commentary on human hope. What justness of observation, what preciseness of color, what splendor of word-music in a masterpiece like this! And in the closing stanzas what supreme cry of regret, what choking tears for all that beauty which allures the heart, but which, alas, is so short-lived!

"And now the mustering rooks innumerable  
Together sail and soar,  
While for the day's death, like a tolling knell,  
Unto the heart they seem to cry, Farewell,  
No more, farewell, no more!

Is Hope not plumed, as 'twere a fiery dart?  
And oh! thou dying day,  
Even as thou goest must she too depart,  
As sorrow fold such pinions on the heart  
As will not fly away?"

The sonnets for pictures are a unique performance; and it is interesting to note that the best of them, with but one or two exceptions, are those written for Rossetti's own pictures. It would seem that the initial inspiration had neither been fulfilled nor exhausted by the painting, and the poem must be written before the creative impulse could be satisfied. And it is quite evident, if we look to such sonnets as *Mary's Girlhood*, *Mary Magdalene*, or *Saint Luke the Painter*, that the painting had in no wise spoilt the chance for the poem, for such sonnets are not merely actively inspired—they are among the poet's best.

*Mary's Girlhood* is inherent with homely virtue, benignity, peace of mind, and calm piety; and in the sestet each new verse adds to the increasing quality of silence and awe, till in the last line we reach a perfect calm prophetic of a great strange dawn. These verses call to mind the sweet simple beauty of another of Rossetti's paintings, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*.

"So held she through her girlhood; as it were  
 An angel-watered lily, that near God  
 Grows and is quiet. Till one day at home  
 She woke in her white bed, and had no fear  
 At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;  
 Because the fulness of the time was come."

Material facts are not in themselves of the essential stuff of poetry; and yet there is no reason why they must remain foreign to it. They are potential raw material—the crude ore from which the poet must extract the pure gold before he can hope to utilize it in the jewel which he has dreamed. No one better than Rossetti could fuse facts into poetry; and in *Saint Luke the Painter* the history of painting is remarkably sketched; the early period when painting became God's priest, after having discovered

"How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day  
 Are symbols also in some deeper way;"

the middle period when

"her toil began to irk,  
 And she sought talismans, and turned in vain  
 To soulless self-reflections of man's skill;"

and the "twilight" period, that period into which Rossetti himself was trying to instill life, that period in which

"she might still  
 Kneel in the latter grass to pray again,  
 Ere the night cometh and she may not work."

In both *Mary Magdalene* and *Found* Rossetti displays as so often elsewhere, a profound insight into the soul of woman. And it is surprising what a thorough, vital, and searching picture has been compacted within so small a compass. *Magdalene* is a magnificent study of the suddenness and completeness with which a woman may be carried away by religious fanaticism. Before her lover is quite aware of the change which the sight of Christ has wrought in her, and while he is still pressing her with words of hot passion, she has gone from him.

"Oh loose me! See'st thou not my Bridegroom's face  
That draws me to him? For his feet my kiss,  
My hair, my tears He craves today:—and oh!  
What words can tell what other day and place  
Shall see me clasp those blood-stained feet of His?  
He needs me, calls me, loves me: let me go!"

*Found* pictures the love of woman turned to hate. Of all of Rossetti's pictures with which I am acquainted, none haunts me with anything like the insistence that does a study of a head for *Found*. In that face are concentrated as one could see them only in a living face, agony, hatred, and despair. It is the same moment of love become violent hate, which the poet has so incomparably caught.

"she cries in her locked heart,—  
'Leave me—I do not know you—go away!'"

Of sonnets for pictures not his own, the most notable is that for the Venetian pastoral of Giorgione. Therein has entered the splendor of the summer day—the warmth, the verdure, the water, the clear blue sky. The sobbing of the viol-strings hushes the flute-player; she lowers the flute from her lips; her gaze is set; and her rapt soul reaches into the Infinite. Into this gathering of pleasure-seekers, and out of their very pleasure, steals the sense of the transitoriness of joy; and lost in her momentary ecstasy this woman hears, not the sound of the viol, but the music of the spheres.

"Say nothing now unto her lest she weep,  
Nor name this ever. Be it as it was,—  
Life touching lips with Immortality."

Among others of the sonnets, not included in *The House of Life*, there are several which give new or added glimpses into the personality of the man and poet. There is the large and virile arraignment of mankind—*On the Refusal of Aid Between the Nations*—because it has lost its sense of family unity and is parcelled out in men; and the upbraiding is the more surprising as coming from so individualistic a man. But he was a leader of men; and it may be that

leaders are sometimes, not of, but apart from the crowd. It was only rarely that Rossetti expressed himself on political questions; but in his art was he not always individualist and yet a leader? *Untimely Lost* is interesting as expressing, at the same time, both hope and doubt of an existence after death.

"A mist has risen: we see the youth no more:  
Does *he* see on and strive on? And may we  
Late-tottering worldworn hence, find *his* to be  
The young strong hand which helps us up that shore?  
Or, echoing the No More with Nevermore,  
Must night be ours and his? We hope: and he?"

Of the sonnets on the English poets, that on Blake, which is perhaps the best, shows Rossetti's interest in and understanding of a poet then scarcely recognized or known. *Spring* is a delightful picture, full of a love for the sheer beauty of the out-of-doors. That one should be happy at the approach of spring is natural enough; but that such joy should be expressed in terms of woman's love is peculiar to Rossetti.

"Yet here the cuckoo and the cuckoo-flower  
Plight to the heart Spring's perfect imminent hour  
Whose breath shall soothe you like your dear one's hand."

## Chapter V

### NARRATIVE POEMS

"She bound her green sleeve on my helm,  
Sweet pledge of love's sweet meed:  
Warm was her bared arm round my neck  
As well she bade me speed;  
And her kiss clings still between my lips,  
Heart's beat and strength at need."

(Fragment)

The best of Rossetti's effort as a narrative poet is to be found in such of his poems as *Eden Bower*, *Sister Helen*, *The Staff and Scrip*, *The Bride's Prelude*, *Rose Mary*, *Dante at Verona*, *The White Ship*, and *The King's Tragedy*; and to open to *The Bride's Prelude* or *The Staff and Scrip* is to look through

"Charm'd magic casements op'ning on the foam  
Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn."

They are redolent of cloisters, towers, quaint musical instruments, old limned manuscripts, and of all that mediaeval setting in which Rossetti was so much at home. They are richly woven pictorial tapestries, suggestive of *Les Lais de Marie de France*. They are at one with such pictures as *The Blue Closet* and *The Christmas Carol*.

It is noteworthy that in most of Rossetti's longer poems—*Jenny*, *Sister Helen*, *Stratton Waters*, *Eden Bower*, *The Staff and Scrip*, *The Bride's Prelude*, *Rose Mary*—his underlying theme is one of the psychology of woman. He would not consciously have labelled it thus, but for all that the fact remains that he was an intense and shrewd student of woman's inner being. He himself would probably have said that he was interested in woman's soul. Her soul it was which he was forever trying to catch in his paintings as in his poems; and his success was in proportion to his effort: no modern artist can compare with him.

There is something grotesque yet sublime in the vanity and hatred, sprung of wounded pride, which makes the snake-woman Lilith enlist the help of the snake in wreaking her wrath on Adam and on God himself.

"O thou Snake, the king-snake of Eden!

(Eden bower's in flower.)

God's strong will our necks are under,

But thou and I may cleave it in sunder.

Help, sweet Snake, sweet lover of Lilith!

(And O the bower and the hour!)

And let God learn how I loved and hated

Man in the image of God created!

.....

Lend thy shape for the shame of Eden!

(And O the bower and the hour!)

Is not the foe-god weak as the foeman

When love grows hate in the heart of a woman?"

No less weird and supernatural, but perhaps rather less shocking than *Eden Bower* is *Sister Helen*. The splendid quality of the treatment in both poems owes much, no doubt, to the keen interest which the poet had in all phases and expressions of magic. Fired with jealousy and a desire for revenge, both Helen and Lilith are absolutely ruthless; but the fact that Helen is entirely human makes her seem still more relentless and violent. The horror which the reader feels in presence of the snake-woman is doubtless due to a natural repugnance for the snake, and more particularly to the added aversion which the admixture of human qualities inspires. In *Sister Helen*, on the other hand, the chill and terror come of the ghostly atmosphere with which the poem surrounds us. Helen is under the spell of her witchcraft. That quality is truly feminine in her which can not be content with the bodily destruction of her false lover, but must pursue his soul even into hell; yet her courage is heroically virile when we realize that in damning her lover she damns herself. It is courage akin to this, which, in *Rose Mary*, prompts the heroine to sacrifice her life in dis-

persing the spirits of evil contained in the beryl-stone.

In dramatic power and directness, in subtle analysis of mood, and in the creation of character, *Sister Helen* is a unique achievement. It is even more subtle than the excellent *Eden Bower*, and is certainly more human. In so subjective a poet as Rossetti it is a startling performance, and he has given us nothing more powerful, nothing more eloquent of his splendid art.

*Rose Mary* reveals another type of womanhood. In Lilith and Helen we have women of power, voluptuous and aggressive, women of soft charms, but women who can become veritable demons when stung to the quick. Rose Mary, on the other hand, is of that frailer type which seeks to lean, to bow down and adore, that type which must be led, which craves the humble task of serving as handmaiden to a lord. For a Lilith or a Helen who has been deceived in love, there is still revenge; for a Rose Mary nothing but tears, a broken heart, and death.

There is a certain resemblance between *Rose Mary* and *The Bride's Prelude*. In the former, Rose Mary, who has sinned, can no longer read aright the signs of the beryl-stone. What she does read is that her lover who has gone to be shriven, preparatory to their wedding, is safe; while the truth is that he has been waylaid and killed. In despair the girl shatters the beryl-stone and dies in the act. On her lover's body is found proof that he had been false to her. What we have of *The Bride's Prelude* tells of the return of the man who had wronged the Bride, had forsaken her, and was now returning to marry her because he found it advantageous. The stories resemble each other but the heroines are quite different. The Bride is a stronger woman than Rose Mary; she has suffered more, is more experienced. She has shed her tears and now her wrath is taking shape. Vengeance will be hers, we feel sure.

A knight comes into a harried land, espouses the cause of the queen with whom he falls in love, and dies for her in the field. As token of her love and gratitude the queen keeps his staff and scrip hanging above her bed till her dying day. This is the thread of *The Staff and Scrip*, one of the most

beautiful and successful of Rossetti's narrative poems. Calm as an August afternoon, and suggestive of remembered sound and fragrance, it possesses an ecstatic and austere beauty akin to that of *The Blessed Damosel*. It is as close-knit as a perfect sonnet, shows wonderful skill in the handling of the stanza, and is altogether suggestive of an old tapestry.

To the contemporaries of Rossetti, notably Morris and Swinburne, *Jenny* seemed to be one of his greatest poems. This was natural enough, when we realize that a poet was taking his life in his hands in treating of a fallen woman, in an age which was best attuned to *Enoch Arden* and Arthurian idylls. It was the daring new departure which appealed to a generation surfeited with sweets, a generation which was already beginning to crave for what seemed to it to be the realities of life. Today, the "new poetry" has worn the harlot, the drunkard, and other types of parasites threadbare, so that *Jenny* could not possibly shock us as it shocked the good Victorians. We have become callous even to "realistic" art, and it may be that we are about to face a dawn, a rebirth of the idealism which, in its art at least, strives to escape from the boredom, trivialities, dross, and ugliness which make up so much of our daily lives. And if the truth be told, the so-called realism is as much a deviation from the whole-truth as is idealism; in other words, it is a sort of idealism, a quest for the extreme, but one whose goal is the ugly rather than the beautiful. Realism can not be art, for art is selective; and realism *must* be a representation rather than a re-creation of life.

Compared with most of the other longer poems of Rossetti, *Jenny* is decidedly less original, subtle, and lyrical. It is lacking in dynamic vitality, and is mostly an account of the poet's reflections on Jenny. Of Jenny herself we get very little. And it is for this reason—because the poem is not a study of Jenny—that I think it an inferior product. We catch a glimpse of the girl's bodily beauty, but we see virtually nothing of her inner self. Perhaps she has precious little soul!

"I wonder what you're thinking of.

.....

Perhaps you're merely glad  
That I'm not drunk or ruffianly  
And let you rest upon my knee."

"Suppose I were to think aloud,—  
What if to her all this were said?  
Why, as a volume seldom read  
Being opened half-way shuts again,  
So might the pages of her brain  
Be parted at such words, and thence  
Close back upon the dusty sense."

Herein lies the whole difference between *Jenny* and *Eden Bower*, for example. The material which the poet employs in *Jenny* is not gold, and no amount of labor or skill can make it gold. *Jenny* has no soul; and yet it is her soul which we want to find in the poem, and which is not there. The poem on the harlot is still to be written; and it will be one in which she damns her lot with a will, or justifies herself so convincingly that we shall be made to realize that she is as justifiable, as worthy, and as nearly happy a member of society as any of us.

Taking *Jenny* for what it is, a man's reflections on the lot of a prostitute, it still remains a performance not unworthy of Rossetti's genius. It is written in a masterly way from the first verse to the last; contains many notable passages, such as that descriptive of lust, or this which is perhaps the most subtle and the most suggestive in the poem.

"How atone  
Great God, for this which man has done?  
And for the body and soul which by  
Man's pitiless doom must now comply  
With lifelong hell, what lullaby  
Of sweet forgetful second birth  
Remains? *All dark. No sign on Earth*  
*What measure of God's rest endows*  
*The many mansions of his house.*"

*Jenny* is marked throughout by a manly and sympathetic pity. The very core of that feeling is beautifully expressed in these two verses:

“Poor handful of bright spring-water  
Flung in the whirlpool’s shrieking face.”

Even less satisfactory than *Jenny*, and quite unlike anything else of Rossetti’s, is *A Last Confession*. Of the type which we call dramatic monologue, it is not without a certain interest; yet it lacks lyrical impulse and suggestion. It narrates rather than creates a dramatic situation; and when once you have read it, you have got all that it has to give, and you will not return to it. Its two most interesting features are the ominous breaking of the image of Love, and the cumulative circumstances of outer and inner wretchedness which lead the lover to momentary madness and to the murder of the girl whose love he had lost.

Quite different is *Dante at Verona*, wherein we have a vivid, sympathetic, and intuitive picture of the great Florentine at the court of Can Grande della Scala, during those years when Dante wandered through Italy, an exile from his native city. A proud lonely dreamer, dwelling aloof at the board of an indifferent and unappreciative host—such is the picture that we have of Dante, a picture which is for the most part creative and imaginative having as its core of fact the verses from the *Paradiso*

“Tu proverai sí come sa di sale  
Lo pane altrui e com’ è duro calle  
Lo scendere e il salir per l’ altrui scale.”

Pitched in a minor key, the poem is one of those in which the moods are made known through the atmosphere, and the whole is construed in keeping with the exile’s “salty bread” and “steep stairs,” and with those moments in which he sought solace in solitude and in the thought of his lost love.

"At such times, Dante, thou hast set  
 Thy forehead to the painted pane  
 Full oft, I know; and if the rain  
 Smote it outside, her fingers met  
 Thy brow; and if the sun fell there,  
 Her breath was on thy face and hair."

And it is due to the distinct intellectual and emotional kinship of these two men that Rossetti has been able to draw us so sympathetic a sketch of Dante.

*The White Ship* and *The King's Tragedy* are the only ones of Rossetti's ballads which are based on historical matter—the former dealing with the loss at sea of the son of Henry I, and the latter with the murder of James I of Scotland. Both tales are brilliantly and concisely told and are the most purely narrative of any of the poems. Only such asides of setting and atmosphere are given as are necessary to heighten the dramatic effects. In *The White Ship* the blind and tameless might of the sea broods over the poem like a bird of ill omen, as do also the prayers to God for justice of the people who had suffered under the tyranny of the king.

"(The sea hath no King but God alone.)

.....

Of ruthless strokes full many an one  
 He had struck to crown himself and his son;

.....

And when to the chase his court would crowd,  
 The poor flung ploughshares on his road,  
 And shrieked: 'Our cry is from King to God!'

The narrative is put into the mouth of the sole survivor of the shipwreck, a poor butcher. In a splendidly simple passage he tells how when he rose to the surface of the water he found another man clinging with him to a mainyard.

"Where lands were none 'neath the dim sea-sky,  
We told our names, that man and I.

'O I am Godefroy de l'Aigle hight,  
And son I am to a belted knight.'

'And I am Berold the butcher's son  
Who slays the beasts in Rouen town'."

A third head appears above water, that of the ship's captain

"He clung, and 'What of the Prince?' quoth he.  
'Lost, lost!' we cried. He cried, 'Woe on me!'  
And loosed his hold and sank through the sea."

The knight's strength gives out and he too sinks leaving Berold to be rescued at length by fishermen. Nothing of the horrible news is told the king until it can no longer be kept from him. When he hears it, he is as one struck dead; and from that day forth he never smiles again.

*The King's Tragedy* is the story of the murder of James I of Scotland by conspirators from among his courtiers. Though warned by an old witch-like woman of the impending danger, the king as if under a spell, seems either powerless or indifferent. Nothing could be more uncanny than the hag's report that each time she had a vision of the king a shroud was enveloping him more and more. The poem gains in dramatic force by such touches as that in which the queen—as if conscious that the exalted position of her husband in itself foreboded ill—seeing "homely lovers," regrets that she and her king could not have been humble like them, and by the scene of merriment which immediately precedes the murder. The manliness and valor of the king, the courage of the queen, and the self-sacrifice and heroism of the queen's maid are all admirable in themselves; but nothing is as memorable as the queen's keeping her lord's embalmed body in state until his death has been avenged.

"And then she said,—'My King, they are dead!'  
And she knelt on the chapel-floor,  
And whispered low with a strange proud smile,—  
'James, James, they suffered more!'

Last she stood up to her queenly height,  
But she shook like an autumn leaf,  
As though the fire wherein she burned  
Then left her body, and all were turned  
To winter of life-long grief."

In *Sister Helen* the heroine is under the spell of her witchcraft; in *Eden Bower* Lilith yields to her snake-nature; in *Rose Mary*, the occult power which overwhelms the individual is that of the spirits of evil in the beryl-stone; in *The White Ship* it is the prayers to God for vengeance, of an oppressed people; and here in *The King's Tragedy* the king can not escape the fate which pursues him, and which, like a sword of Damocles, is forever dangling above his head. We feel from the beginning that violent death is lying in wait for him, that he can not escape it. It is in this very quality of his ballads, in the power of the clash of the individual with an elusive, intangible, blind, and ruthless force, that Rossetti reveals his dramatic insight; and in the shadowy nature with which he invests this dominant force lies the fountain-head of his magic.

Though primarily a lyric poet, a poet of quick, intense, and subtle ecstasies, Rossetti has left us, in his longer poems, ample proof of splendid narrative, descriptive, and dramatic gifts; and in such characters as Lilith and Helen, for example, he has given us poetic creations as clearcut and alive as those of any poet we have had.

## Chapter VI

### MYSTICISM

"Accepting me to be of those that haunt  
The vale of magical dark mysteries"

(Dantis Tenebrae)

"Ask any man who has passionately loved a woman and lost her; ask him at what moment mysticism was forced upon him—at what moment he felt that he must either accept a spiritualistic theory of the universe or go mad; ask him this, and he will tell you that it was at that moment when he first looked upon her as she lay dead, with corruption's foul fingers waiting to soil and stain." Such was Rossetti's attitude towards mysticism, as presented by Watts-Dunton in the admirable picture he has given us of the painter-poet in *Aylwin*. But the cult of contemplative ecstasy did not suddenly dawn upon Rossetti after he had lost the woman whom he had passionately loved. It had always been a part of him, lay at the core of his first notable poem—*The Blessed Damosel*—and pervaded all his life and work. Dealing as it does with that which affects man, and yet is beyond his material control, it is closely allied to magic; and it was through his mysticism, as it must needs have been, that he attained to his loftiest flights and most subtle depths.

Yet one must speak cautiously of Rossetti's mysticism. He is universally and peremptorily labeled a mystic, and the question stops there. One reads *The Blessed Damosel*, and exclaims, "Oh, yes; here is a poet who communes directly with a blessed spirit; he is a mystic." But this is only a half-truth; and we must carry the question further, examine this mysticism more carefully, and, if we can, discover the whole truth. In the first place, if by mysticism we mean the direct communion of the individual with God, we must know what Rossetti meant by God. At best he is "foggy" and ambiguous on this question. He sometimes

thinks of God in the Christian sense of a Supreme Being apart from and superior to man; sometimes as the Over-soul, the fountain-head and ultimate goal of all life; sometimes as the happiness attained in perfect love; and in general as whatever is beyond man's control. Moreover, God rarely enters into Rossetti's sphere, and when he does it is always in a secondary way. So there is nothing of what would commonly be called the religious element in this mysticism. God is not sought, and if found, it is merely incidentally. This mysticism begins and ends with love. If there is a fusion of the individual with God, it is accomplished through love; but in the process that primal love is not lost, is not displaced by a different or greater love. There are no degrees of love, as in Plato; love of man or woman, love of society, love of God. There is but one stage, and we do not pass from love to God, but may attain God in love. To love is to reach the *summum bonum*, to be at one with it; and love with Rossetti is always love of man and woman. So his is a unique mysticism; one which seeks peace in the unity, the entity of man. Man and woman are the factors of that potential entity; and love is achieved when the potential entity has become a reality.

"How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,  
When by the new birth borne abroad  
Throughout the music of the suns,  
It enters in her soul at once  
And knows the silence there for God!"

"Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God."

That Rossetti was religious—in the large sense of the word—can not be denied, and will not be denied except by him who exacts that we all worship his particular Gods. But let us be understood; Rossetti's goal was Beauty, his religion the cult of Beauty, and his high-priest Love. Elements of other creeds, of the mediaeval church, for example, he used as symbols for his own; but they were merely sym-

bols, appealing to his aesthetic rather than his religious sense.

Life offers us many signs if we can but seize and interpret them: intimations of pre-existence and forecasts of what our lot will be after death. A swallow soars overhead, the beloved turns to watch it, and as she turns, the curve of her neck flashes upon her lover's inner eye and he is suddenly aware that he has loved her before, long ago, somehow, somewhere. Then he reflects; since he has loved her before this his earthly existence, will not that pre-natal love be his again after death; and is not the earthly sojourn only a momentary obstacle in the way of the perfect and eternal love? Or it may be that as man goes through life in quest of the perfect partner from whom birth has separated him, he suddenly comes upon her and recognizes her as

"One nearer kindred than life hinted of."

Or again, it may be the sound of music which recalls one's ancestral home, speaks to one of one's former existence and of that which is to come, shows the transitoriness of the earthly life, and gives one courage to pursue the journey to the end. A more subtle and authentic message than this of *The Monochord*,<sup>1</sup> it could scarcely be granted a poet to utter.

Life is merely an interruption in, a temporal barrier to the perfect love, and death marks the "new birthday," the soul's actual re-birth. Death reunites lovers and brings to fruition love which had been imperfect on earth. The occult power which defies time, space, and other material elements, transcends sleep as well; and Love, the keeper of sleep, may bring together lovers whom waking hours had found far apart.

What I have said thus far represents one phase of Rossetti's faith, that phase which we find expressed in *The Blessed Damosel*, *Love's Nocturn*, *The Stream's Secret*, *The Song of The Bower*, *Sudden Light*, *The Staff and Scrip*, *Bridal Birth*, *The Birth-Bond*, and many other poems; yet even this mystic faith was not without having been shaken

by the doubt of the nineteenth century, and in the bitterly sad *Without Her* it is completely wanting. The group of sonnets entitled *Willowwood* presents the futility of hope in love. It might be clearer, but that is because the whole is "so meshed with half-remembrance hard to free." The message, however, is unmistakable; and the pictorial setting is no less striking than it is clear. The lover sits with Love beside a well, and as the lover stoops to drink, Love, as with a magic wand, disturbs the water with his foot and wing and causes his reflection to become that of the lover's beloved. As the lips of the lovers meet at the well's brink Love sings to the accompaniment of his lute, exhorting his votaries to make the most of love today, and as he sings the ghosts of the lovers' allotted days appear and add to Love's exhortation. As the song ends the lovers' kiss uncloses, and as the lover sees the face of his beloved fall back through the water his heart wells with the agony of despair; he has perhaps looked upon that face for the last time. Even love is short-lived, is indeed a thing to be grasped when offered or utterly lost.

"So when the song died did the kiss unclose;  
And her face fell back drowned, and was as gray  
As its gray eyes; *and if it ever may*  
*Meet mine again I know not if Love knows."*

Here is the climax of *Willowwood*; and in the verses which I have italicized is the supreme cry of one whose doubt overshadowed his faith. Nothing more poignant is to be found in Rossetti. He wished to believe in love at least, but for the moment he could not; and to doubt love was to doubt all, for to him love was the one good granted to man.

It might be difficult to say which attitude, that of faith or of doubt, was the prevailing one with Rossetti, though I suspect that it was that of faith. The bulk of his work would surely point in that direction; and in winding up *The House of Life* with the sonnet *The One Hope* he chose to make his last stand one for faith.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE HOUSE OF LIFE

"This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
Thy voice and hand shake still,—long known to thee  
By flying hair and fluttering hem,—the beat  
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
How passionately and irretrievably,  
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!"  
(Soul's Beauty)

Through an arbor hung with exotic vines we enter into a deep grove of indistinct trees, yet trees whose foliage is so thick that only an occasional sunbeam can sift through. Here and there we catch between the tree-trunks vistas of far away hills and sunny fields. On every hand are densely grown flowers which give off a permeating fragrance as of lilies and roses. Now and then we catch the song of a bird. As we advance along the lanes we pass pools and wells of deep undisturbed water, and meet with shadowy personages who look half-familiar and who remind us of old loves and of past joys and sorrows. An abrupt turn and we are suddenly aware that the sky is overcast; a low wind moans through the trees, and the waters of the well near which we have stopped seem darker and forebodingly deeper. As we lean over the brink, a bird sings overhead, and gazing into the well we seem to see—though only indistinctly—faces not wholly unlike our own, worn and drawn faces which show clearly that love and life has had their way with them. We quicken our steps and advance to the outer edge of the grove. The wind is lulled, the clouds break away, and we emerge into the hopeful sunlight of day with something of the spiritual lift which Dante experienced, when, out of an oppressive atmosphere, he came forth to rebehold the stars. This grove through which we have wandered, and wherein we have found a forecast of our own spiritual experiences, is *The House of Life*.

*The House of Life* is the record of a poet's intellectual and emotional life. These poems extend from Rossetti's youth to his last years, and they are thoroughly suffused with his intense and robust personality. Into none of his work has he put so much fundamental brainwork, so much of his indelible self. Only Patmore and Meredith, among our poets, have studied nuptial love as intimately as has Rossetti; yet their methods so differed from his that those poets can hardly be compared with him. Patmore is a moralist systematically proving a thesis; Meredith is a psychologist examining love rationally; while Rossetti is the artist, selecting and catching the moods as they pass. And it is because he is selective that he is the artist, and it is also for the same reason that there is no other phase of continuity in the sonnets of *The House of Life* than that of their general theme. To object to the poet's choice of title for this group of poems, is to convict oneself of not understanding him; for to him love was very nearly all that there was in life, and it never would have seemed to him that his title was either too ambitious or in need of justification. Nor need one assume that the poet was over-mindful of the astrological term "house of life"; for the artist's world is his only world, and it is this world which Rossetti has roofed over with *The House of Life*. Many of the sonnets comprised show clearly that "the house of love" would have been an insufficient title. There are many mansions in this house, and it is in fact, to him who seeks heaven in Beauty, the house of life.

To Rossetti woman was the most compelling of the manifest forms of Beauty, and *The House of Life* is the expression, in part, of his reaction to that beauty. His whole life was one of intensive introspection, of the quest within his own soul of that of which he caught glimpses without; and it is the depth, the subtleness, and the universality of his vision which take us back to him time and again.

There is no very noticeable progression in the manner of Rossetti's poetry, his earliest being very much at one with his latest, though it must be said that with the fullness of experience and the maturity of middle and later life the

poet became more and more the interpreter of elusive moods, and as he strove to present them in succinct and suggestive speech he developed verbal idiosyncracies which were almost non-English. I have in mind such overfull verses as the following, for example.

"The speech-bound sea-shell's low importunate strain"

"Some prisoned moon in steep cloud-fastnesses"

"And penury's sedulous self-torturing thought"

Occasionally too, there is an involved construction which will mar an otherwise beautiful poem; and yet in spite of this, and in spite of such other shortcomings in Rossetti's craftsmanship as those of which I have spoken in another chapter, *The House of Life* remains the most carefully and beautifully wrought body of lyric poetry in the language. It is deep-fruited with spiritual experience, with an absolutely unique imagination, with incomparable virility, with a dynamic quest of beauty, with passion and a subtle understanding of it, and with an economy and felicity of expression never compassed by other lyric poets except sporadically.

I have said before that Rossetti's was the ecstasy of contemplation, an ecstasy which is natural and spontaneous in its impulse, but which finds expression only after having been carefully and deliberately sifted and measured. It has nothing of the so-called "lyric cry" of this, for example,

"The sea! the sea! the open sea!

The blue, the fresh, the ever free!"

is not impelled and quickened by the flow of language, as was Swinburne's, but is selective, and expresses its intensity by its sense of restraint and order. It is this ecstasy which the poet is describing, in the beautiful sonnet called *Broken Music*, when he says:

"mid doubts and fears

Thus oft my soul has hearkened; *till the song,*  
*A central moan for days, at length found tongue,*  
*And the sweet music welled and the sweet tears."*

It is this ecstasy which is the life-breath of *The House of Life*.

The earlier portions of the series are given over largely to the praise of love and woman; but the general tone is one of melancholy, arising out of life's disillusionment. As early as the second sonnet death is imminent, and in the fourth is a forecast of what was to be a reality all too soon.

"O love, my love! if I no more should see  
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,  
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,—  
How then should sound upon life's darkening slope  
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?"

And who that has followed in the ways of Beauty has not feared and heard the ground-whirl of those leaves and the wind of Death's wing? Beauty too, like earth and man, has its fall as well as its spring; and it is the perishable quality of its manifestations, perhaps more than any other, which gives it the supreme place in the human heart and makes it akin to our strength, desires, hopes, despair, and resignation.

Disillusionment and death are dominant notes in *The House of Life*, and even in love's seemingly perfect hour, when the lover is secretly counting up love's gold, shadows steal across his heart. Youth with its inexperience, with its infinite capacity for dreaming and its very limited power to achieve embraces love with the blind faith that heaven is scaled at last; but "Hope sows what Love shall never reap," and heaven awaits those lovers only who cherish

"This test for love: in every kiss sealed fast  
To feel the first kiss and forbode the last."

As the series advances, the poet's experience broadens, and sonnets in praise of love and the beloved give way more and more to sonnets expressing various other moments in the spiritual life of the lover of Beauty. The sonnet has not been made to function as a stanza, but has remained an en-

tity, so that we may examine the individual sonnets, much as we might the paintings in a gallery, without too much attention to their numerical order.

Elsewhere I have said that with Rossetti love of body, of the soul, and of God were often one; and without necessarily implying that the three marked three phases in an upward progression, he sometimes differentiated very clearly between love of the body and love of the soul. This was the case in the two sonnets, *Body's Beauty* and *Soul's Beauty*, sonnets written for two of his own pictures, and originally entitled *Lilith* and *Sibylla Palmifera*, but afterwards, with the titles changed, included in *The House of Life*. In *Body's Beauty*, woman with her sweet voice and golden hair

"Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are in its hold."

Herself the unconscious servant of the race, she breaks man's will as an individual and bends his neck to bear with her the yoke which the race imposes. There is something electric, awesome, and irresistible in the casting of her spell, something to remind one of Michelangelo's fresco, in the Sistine Chapel, wherein we see God stretching out his hand to communicate the spark of life to Adam.

"Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
Thy spell through him and left his straight neck bent,  
And round his heart one strangling golden hair."

*Soul's Beauty* marks the soul's quest after its ideal Beauty; glimpsing it now in some aspect of the sea, now of the sky, and now of woman. Beauty lights the way, and the lover follows irretrievably on and ever on

"In what fond flight, how many ways and days!"

And Rossetti's art—painting and poetry—is the record of the fond flights and the ways and days in which he has followed Beauty; and she has never before so absorbed a man, nor has she ever had another such votary!

To few lovers indeed is it granted to enshrine the beloved

in art, and to fewer still to enshrine her in more than one form of art. The lover finds, after having sung his lady's praise in poetry, that her beauty eludes him still and that there remains much to be said. He lays by his pen, takes up his brush, and, hopeful of catching her at last, attempts her portrait. Yet, when all is said and done he realizes that what he has been seeking is, not his lady, but Beauty—she whom one may discern but may never attain. In *The Portrait*, he makes the daring and ambitious appeal to Love that it be granted him to paint the beloved so well that those who look on her portrait may know

"The very sky and sea-line of her soul";

and to such a worshipper, Love is so far propitious that when the portrait is done

"The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss,  
*The shadowed eyes remember and foresee.*  
 Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note  
 That in all years (O love, thy gift is this!)  
 They that would look on her must come to me."

Of the three beautiful sonnets entitled *True Woman*, the most remarkable, I think, is the second, that called *Her Love*; for it reveals an understanding of woman's love, rarely possessed by man. Woman's love, unlike man's, is neither impulsive nor aggressive, but reflective, passive, receptive, and constant withal. Hers is the love that yields, that gives.

"Yet as morn springs or twilight sinks to rest,  
*Ah! who shall say she deems not loveliest*  
*The hour of sisterly sweet hand-in-hand?"*

Her love's quintessence is in its power to console, to soothe, to hearten; in its "sisterly sweet hand-in-hand" quality. It is not creative, but restful; not of a kind to excite desire, but to allay it. This surely is of the very essence of sympathy.

As in the gallery one might turn from one type of paintings to another, so here let us turn to see love given the

splendid out-of-door settings that we find in *Youth's Spring Tribute* and *Silent Noon*. The two sonnets resemble each other, for both are exhortations to grasp love's swift-footed hour; but in the former April is ushering in the spring, and in the latter "the noonday stands still for heat."

"On this sweet bank your head thrice sweet and dear  
I lay, and spread your hair on either side,  
And see the newborn woodflowers bashful-eyed  
Look through the golden tresses here and there.  
On these debateable borders of the year  
Spring's foot half-falters: scarce she yet may know  
The leafless hawthorn-blossoms from the snow;  
And through her bowers the wind's way still is clear."

"Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass,—  
The finger points look through like rosy blooms:  
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms  
'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.  
All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,  
Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge  
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.  
'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass."

One need not comment upon description which contains such graphic and incomparable strokes as

"On these debateable borders of the year  
Spring's foot half-falters"

and

" 'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass."

I have already said that death was imminent on the very threshold of *The House of Life*, and in the desolate cry of *Without Her* we shudder with the chill of its dank breath. Love itself is dead; and all things are dead save the lover's great sorrow and his bitterly grieving heart. And notice, in these verses, how the heart's loneliness and despair increase as life's horizon of barren ways and years expands before it.

"What of the heart without her? Nay, poor heart,  
Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?  
A wayfarer by barren ways and chill,  
Steep ways and weary, without her thou art,  
Where the long cloud, the long wood's counterpart,  
Sheds doubled darkness up the laboring hill."

Let us look now at sonnets which depict sundry moods. First there is *Autumn Idleness*, the sestet of which is so thoroughly suffused with the haze and quiet of *Autumn*, and which sums up in its closing verses the very spirit of listlessness.

"While I still lead my shadow o'er the grass,  
Nor know for longing that which I should do."

Then there is *The Hill Summit* with its gorgeous sunset and its spiritual suggestion of isolation, and almost of dismay, in the verses

"And now that I have climbed and won this height,  
I must tread downward through the sloping shade  
And travel the bewildered tracks till night."

He who has watched with longing and regret, the sun setting beyond a perfect day will find his heart following after "the last bird" of the closing verse. And with what a growing sense of passing into a great unknown do we follow this bird as he vanishes "into the last light."

"Yet for this hour I still may here be stayed  
And see the gold air and the silver fade  
And the last bird fly into the last light."

*The Choice*—a group of three sonnets, which because of their moralizing tone are hardly characteristic of Rossetti, and in spite of it are strong and altogether worthy—presents the attitude of the voluptuary, the preacher, and the imaginative creator. The voluptuary thinks

"Surely the earth, that's wise being very old,  
Needs not our help"

and he condemns those

“who increase  
Vain gold, vain lore, and yet might choose our way!  
Through many years they toil; then on a day  
They die not,—for their life was death,—but cease;  
And round their narrow lips the mould falls close.”

Assuredly, there is something convincing in the scorn of the lip as it curls to enunciate that last verse! The preacher admonishes us, saying:

“Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear;”

And the man who is not content with living on the fruit of his fellows' toil, pushes on, knowing that though he reach the ultimate confines of man's achievement,

“Still leagues beyond those leagues there is more sea.”

Picture a man come to a halt mid-way in his life, in doubt as to whether the journey is worth pursuing any further, and looking back over the past wondering what it is that has urged him thus far

“Those unknown things or these things overknown”

and you have something of what the poet has given us in *From Dawn to Noon*. It is heartening and fascinating, though in Rossetti not startling but quite natural, to find the voluptuary an ascetic; and that is what we have in *Retro Me Sathana*—Art's ascetic, who cares nothing for the worldliness of worldlings, and whose only path is the narrow one which leads to the understanding and contemplation of Beauty.

Now if we turn once more, we may examine still another, part of *The House of Life*, the largest part, that part which mourns lost joys, lost hopes, lost days—all that man sets his heart upon and in the end finds vain. It is because this part is the largest that the general tone of *The House of Life* is melancholy; and whether the beauty of decline is more poignant than that of growth, I do not know; but I do feel

that this sonnet sequence owes most to its sombre side. 'Tis here that we find *Stillborn Love*, the love which might have been yet never was; *Inclusiveness* wherein an earthly setting may be associated by a spirit in heaven with the remembrance of a good deed, while the self-same setting to one in hell calls up only a vain memory; and *Known in Vain*, which tells of effort and will, both good in themselves, but rendering life futile by being forever at variance. I can not pass over these sonnets without calling attention to the originality, amounting to grotesqueness, of the imagination displayed in this quatrain from *Inclusiveness*.

"What man has bent o'er his son's sleep, to brood  
How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—  
Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes  
Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?"

A vain task will be his who looks for "literary influences" in a poet who writes verses like these!

To this same category of sonnets which sing the vanity of vain things, belong *Willowwood*, *The Landmark*, *Hoarded Joy*, *Farewell To The Glen*, *Lost Days*, *Lost On Both Sides*, *A Superscription*, and *Newborn Death*. They are beautiful songs, sad but always virile; and since I have said enough to show what a conspicuous part they play in *The House of Life*, I shall not attempt to give in paraphrase what Rossetti has put into these the loveliest of his poems. No paraphrase could do them justice. One word more. In *Newborn Death*, the poet has come to life's last relay, and looking back and beholding Love, and Song, and Art, he despairs, thinks that all has been vain, and wonders whether he has served these three that Life, in the end, might yield him nothing but Death.

At the beginning of this chapter *The House of Life* was compared with a grove. It might also be likened to a temple. Through the sombre alcoves and aisles of this temple we have followed the Great Lover, marvelling at each perfect portal, arch, window, and frieze, which go to make up the perfect whole, now loitering in the dim sunbeams stealing through the colored glass, now aghast before

some ominous suggestion of death; and now, finally, we have entered into the holy of holies, into a luminous tabernacle, where on the altar stands the erect and radiant figure of *The One Hope*. On the pedestal is an inscription, and there we read Life's answer to the question which the poet had put to it in *Newborn Death*.

“When vain desire at last and vain regret  
Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,  
What shall assuage the unforgotten pain  
And teach the unforgetful to forget?  
Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet,—  
Or may the soul at once in a green plain  
Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain  
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?  
Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air  
Between the scripted petals softly blown  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,—  
Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er  
But only the one Hope's one name be there,—  
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

It is perhaps impossible to say of Rossetti's poetry that one part is more characteristic of his genius than another; his ballads are as unmistakably his as is *The House of Life*; and all is admirably wrought. He is never concerned with anything less than the quintessence of poetry, never breathes anything but clear ether. He belongs to that school of artists who do comparatively little, but who do that little as nearly perfectly as is humanly possible. In France he would have been admitted to the Academy, if he had cared for such a distinction, as was Heredia with his little book—*Les Trophées*. In *The House of Life* he has given us an inimitable body of lyric poetry. To match it on any ground it would be necessary to cull a nosegay from English lyric poetry of all times; and even such a garland would of necessity lack the uniform excellence of matter and manner which is *The House of Life's*. Then there are the ballads, such as *Sister Helen*, *Eden Bower*, *Rose Mary*, *The King's Tragedy*, and such of the more purely lyric poems as *The Blessed Damosel*, *The Stream's Secret*, *The Cloud Confines*, and *The Sea Limits*. Not only are all of these excellent; they are unique. They mark a new departure in English poetry.

Rossetti was too analytical, too thoughtful to be lyrical. He was wary of what is spontaneously expressed, knowing that all gushing waters are not pure, in fact are seldom pure. They have the virtue of impetus, to be sure, but unless their beds are solid the waters are very likely to be charged with sediment. Those poets are very few whose work might not have been improved by a more deliberate craftsmanship. Rossetti possessed a virile and spontaneous inspiration, but true artist that he was, he scorned slovenly workmanship and revered what was impeccable. And perhaps the most remarkable feature of his craftsmanship is this, that in polishing he did not fret away the initial core

of his inspiration. He was not content with embellishing his verses, he must strengthen them. Were not his work as a whole of so uniform an excellence, we might often accept as spontaneous what is really deliberate. He is constantly giving us what seems like the inevitable word or phrase, beguiling us into believing that what he weighed very carefully has fallen casually from his lips—achieving thus the very highest that art can achieve. How deliberately he worked, and with what results, can be readily seen if one examines the first and last version of certain of his poems.

Rossetti was almost never a moralist. Those poems, as *Jenny*, in which he did moralize are fortunately few, and are never among his best. And it may be precisely because he did not moralize that he has not been more popular. In another than an Anglo-Saxon country, it might have been different; but what fate may the lover of beauty expect at the hands of a people, who, if the could, would make Shakespeare out to be a preacher? In Italy there is room for a Petrarch, a Carducci, a D'Annunzio; in France for a Villon, a Musset, a Verlaine; but in England and America they exact "high seriousness" of an artist, and not as an artist, for no artist has ever been more serious than Rossetti, but a high seriousness which makes for puritanism and morality.

Recently I have been reading letters written by Mr. J. B. Yeats to his son the poet, in which the father says something to this effect, that what can be explained is not poetry. Without pretending to understand this statement, which itself may not be explainable, I suspect that it points in the same direction as does Rossetti's poetry. Poetry should be addressed to the imagination, not the understanding; should suggest, not narrate; should be concerned with moods rather than facts. And because Rossetti's poetry is of this kind is perhaps the reason why he is Greek to the philistines and oracle to the poets. It is much more nearly true of him than of Shelley that he is a poet's poet. Shelley is too often rapt in social reform. Rossetti is pure gold; but has little or no significance to those who either care nothing for the beauty

of pure gold or must mix their gold with alloy in order that they may coin it.

Original, rich in color, palpably imaginative, sincere, virile, and melancholy—such is Rossetti's poetry; and although it has profited by the great tradition of English poetry, it stands apart from it more distinctly than that of any other great poet. It is not a continuation, but an addition. In the great stream of English poetry, his is a cove, not deriving much impetus from the current above nor yielding much to that below; but a more glorious cove, one of deeper waters and more luxuriant banks, is not to be found along the entire length of that splendid stream. Here will sojourn those who move calmly, deliberately, and determined to enjoy as they go, not those who rush headlong with the current not knowing where they are going nor why. And yet, although his contribution is not one of influence, but of the thing in itself—his poetry—he has given us, in his sonnets, a measuring-rod and fixed the standard. Since his day the bipartite sonnet has enjoyed a vogue which it had never known before, has been used almost exclusively, and has met with a success due in a large part to a more or less conscious adherence to the principles which his sonnets embody.

In France romanticism came to mean the lacrymose venting of the individual's indolence and boredom; in England, whence it had passed to France, it was much more robust and sincere, and expressed the revolt of the individual, his breaking away from a too constraining society, his expression of the self, and his refuge in the elemental and larger phases of Nature; in Rossetti it reached its high-water mark—the contemplation of the sad beauty of the conquest of the individual by the Race.

"he on honey-dew hath fed  
And drunk the milk of Paradise."







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